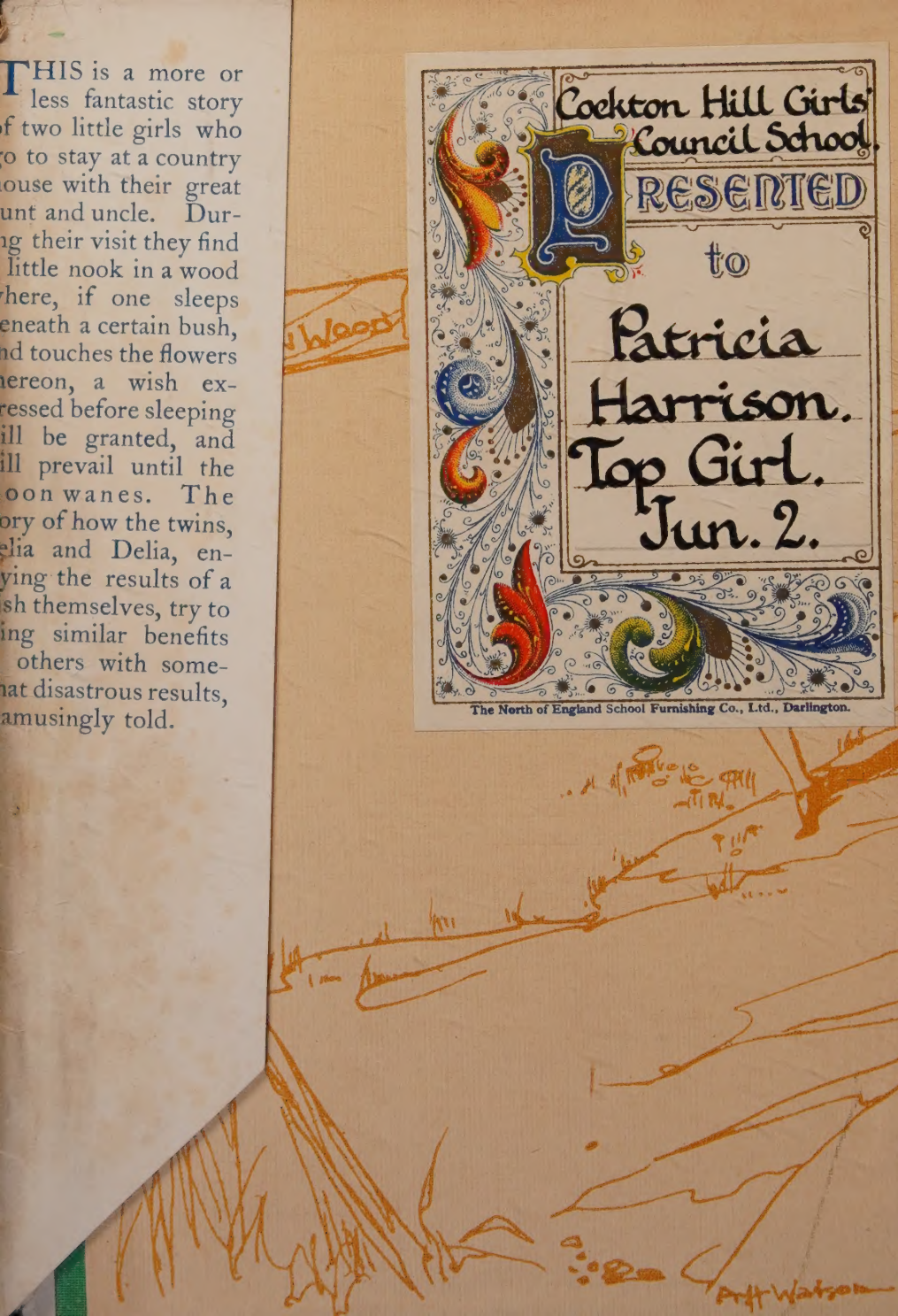
THE
WISHING WOOD
A. H. Watson

THIS is a more or less fantastic story of two little girls who go to stay at a country house with their great aunt and uncle. During their visit they find a little nook in a wood where, if one sleeps beneath a certain bush, and touches the flowers thereon, a wish expressed before sleeping will be granted, and will prevail until the moon wanes. The story of how the twins, Celia and Delia, enjoying the results of a wish themselves, try to bring similar benefits to others with somewhat disastrous results, is amusingly told.



The WISHING WOOD

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

A FAIRY TO STAY

SEVEN PLAYS OF FAIRY DAYS

OTHER PLAYS OF FAIRY DAYS

AND THEN THEY FELL ASLEEP

(*See chapter III*)

The WISHING WOOD

By
MARGARET BEATRICE LODGE

Illustrated by
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CHAPTER I

THE ARRIVAL

'THE children ought to be here at any moment now!' said Great-Aunt Susan eagerly, as she came into the library.

Great-Uncle James only grunted.

'I do wonder what they will be like, little dears!' remarked Great-Aunt Susan, not for the first time, as she seated herself in the arm-chair opposite to Great-Uncle James, hoping for a little sympathetic conversation.

'I hope they'll be quiet and well-behaved anyway,' growled Great-Uncle James from behind *The Times*.

For Andesley Hall was in such an out-of-the-way part of England that his newspaper never reached Great-Uncle James before tea-time, and then the reading of it usually lasted him until it was time to change for dinner.

'Oh, they are sure to be that!' said Great-Aunt Susan soothingly. 'Little girls, you know,' she added vaguely; as much as to say that little girls could always be counted on to behave nicely, whatever little boys might do.

'Humph!' grunted Great-Uncle James. 'They're your nephew Peter's children. They may take after their father!'

'The dear boy!' sighed Great-Aunt Susan.

'Yes, he was a *dear* boy!' said Great-Uncle James grimly. 'A pretty penny it cost replacing all the windows he broke while he stayed here!'

'And now he has overworked himself so dreadfully, travelling up and down to that horrid, *rushing* London,' went on Great-Aunt Susan, pretending not to remember about the windows. 'I do trust this visit to Switzerland will quite set him up again. And it was so good of you,

James, to say I could have the children here so that their mother could go abroad too. A man does need his wife to take care of him when he isn't well.'

Great-Uncle James grunted again and looked as if he thought it *was* very good of him.

'It is only for a fortnight or so, just until they go on to the seaside; and I'm sure they won't trouble you at all,' said their great-aunt hopefully. 'Of course it is unfortunate that their nurse has been prevented from coming too, owing to her mother's illness. But then two children together are always much easier than one alone. And twins too! I expect they will be perfectly happy playing about in the garden together.'

'Don't let them bring a ball within a hundred yards of the windows, anyway,' ordered Great-Uncle James.

'No, no, dear! I don't suppose they will want to play at ball at all. They will have their dolls or teddy-bears, or whatever it is little girls play with nowadays, and amuse themselves quietly with them. You will probably hardly know that there are children about the place at all!'

At that moment the sound of a motor-horn was heard, tooting furiously as it came up the drive.

'There they are!' cried Great-Aunt Susan, jumping up eagerly.

'What on earth is Bolton about, making that appalling din?' asked Great-Uncle James testily.

Great-Aunt Susan hurried to the window. Then she gave a little gasp.

'Oh!' she said, 'it isn't Bolton sounding the horn, James; it's the dear children.'

Putting aside *The Times*, Great-Uncle James heaved himself out of his arm-chair and joined his wife at the window.

There came the car round the last bend of the drive. There sat Bolton at the wheel, staid and steady as usual.

And there on the front seat beside him sat two small girls, hatless, with their short fair hair blowing in the wind, each with a hand on the motor-horn, which they continued to sound with all their might.

Great-Uncle James snorted indignantly.

'So those are your quiet children!' he exclaimed.

But Great-Aunt Susan had already left his side and was hurrying away to the front door to welcome her guests.

'There you are, dear children!' she cried, as the twins tumbled themselves out of the car and gazed up at her with two pairs of big brown eyes. 'I am your Great-Aunt Susan, and I am *so* glad to see you at last!'

The twins decided immediately that she looked kind, and smiled back at her accordingly.

'How do you do, Great-Aunt Susan,' they said together politely as they went up the steps to meet her.

Their great-aunt kissed them both warmly.

'And are you very tired after your long journey?' she asked. 'And did your nurse travel with you, and catch her train back again to the junction?'

One twin answered 'No, thank you,' to the first question, and the other, 'Yes, thank you,' to the second.

'I could not manage to come to the station myself, but I knew Bolton would bring you up safely,' said Great-Aunt Susan. 'And now you must tell me which is Celia and which is Delia.'

'I'm Delia, and that's Celia,' answered one twin.

The other was smiling up at the butler, who had just arrived at the door, and holding out her hand to him, saying:

'How do you do, Great-Uncle James!'

The butler hastened down the steps and pretended to be very busy getting out the luggage.

'That isn't your great-uncle, dear,' said Great-Aunt Susan quickly; 'that is Parker, our butler.' She put a

kindly arm round the child, fearing the mistake might abash her.

But Celia was not easily abashed.

'How funny!' she said. 'He's *just* my idea of Great-Uncle James!'

'So he is mine!' said Delia. And they both gazed at the bald-headed, clean-shaven Parker with great interest.

'Well, now you must come into the library and see the real Great-Uncle James,' said Great-Aunt Susan rather hurriedly. 'But where are your hats?' she added anxiously, 'Surely you didn't travel like that?'

'Oh no! we had hats,' said Celia.

'They're somewhere in the car,' explained Delia.

Bolton came up the steps carrying two little fawn-coloured overcoats and two wide-brimmed felt hats to match.

'The young ladies would take them off, mum,' he said apologetically.

'We hardly ever wear hats in the country,' said Celia.

'But we will when you want us to,' put in Delia quickly. 'Mummy said we were to wear hats and socks when you wanted us to.'

'There's good children!' said Great-Aunt Susan, giving a hasty glance downward and being relieved to find that the neat pale fawn-coloured socks had not been removed yet. She drew the twins one on either side of her into the library.

'James, here are your two great-nieces come to see you!'

'How do you do, Great-Uncle James!' said the twins, advancing in a friendly manner.

'Hey! how d'ye do! how d'ye do!' said Great-Uncle James, shaking hands with them quickly as if to get the greeting over as soon as possible. 'Glad to see you here! Ha! hum! Did you bring an evening paper with you?'

This was always Great-Uncle James's first inquiry when anyone arrived by the 6.30 train.

'No, no, James! Of course they didn't!' put in Great-Aunt Susan.

'We brought *Little Folks*', said Celia eagerly. 'We'll get it for you!'

The twins both made a dash for the door to fetch *Little Folks*, for their father and mother had told them they must remember to run about and fetch things for Great-Aunt Susan and Great-Uncle James whenever they could, and here was their first opportunity. In a moment they reappeared and presented their surprised great-uncle with the brightly-covered magazine.

'Here it is!' said Celia.

'We bought it ourselves at a bookstall!' said Delia proudly.

'Thank ye! thank ye!' said Great-Uncle James rather feebly, rightly taking his wife's nods and frowns to mean that he must not refuse the kindly-meant offer. 'Not quite in my line, perhaps, but thank ye all the same.' And he sat turning over the pages of *Little Folks* as if rather bewildered at finding himself in possession of something so different from the *Evening Standard*.

Great-Aunt Susan drew the children down beside her on the leather-covered couch against the wall, and asked questions about their journey and their parents' journey to Switzerland, and the twins answered her readily and politely, while occasionally their eyes roved round the old room with its oak-panelled walls and the funny, old-fashioned coloured prints of hunting and shooting scenes. And while the twins were examining the room Great-Aunt Susan examined the twins.

'What very pretty, unusual-looking children!' she thought, 'and how extraordinarily alike!'

They were small and slight, with mops of yellow,

bobbed hair, and very fair complexions, and it was the brownness of their eyes in contrast with the fairness of their skins and hair that gave them an unusual appearance. They were dressed exactly alike in tussore silk smocks, with socks of the same shade, and brown strap shoes.

'Do you know, my dears,' said Great-Aunt Susan presently, 'I am afraid I must ask again which is Celia and which is Delia, because I have quite forgotten!'

The twins obligingly introduced themselves again.

'Now I wonder how I shall ever remember, because you are so very like each other, you know!'

'As like as two peas in a pod!' said Great-Uncle James.

'I don't expect you'll remember at first, but we don't mind,' said Celia consolingly.

'Mummy and Nanny are the only people who know us *always*,' said Delia.

'Mummy says I get the dirtiest and untidiest,' said Celia.

'But I get pretty dirty too,' remarked Delia.

'Dear! dear!' said Great-Aunt Susan, rather startled by these revelations.

'See!' observed Celia triumphantly, 'I've got two black knees from the train, and Delia's only got one!'

Great-Aunt Susan looked, and even without her spectacles could see three decidedly grimy knees, while even the fourth was not quite so white as it might have been.

'Dear! dear!' she said again.

'Bless my soul!' exclaimed Great-Uncle James. And he stared quite fiercely from under his bushy eyebrows, first at one twin and then at the other, as if he had never seen anything quite like them before.

'Now, dears,' said Great-Aunt Susan hastily, 'I expect Mary has finished unpacking your things, and I am sure

you must be ready for bed after your long journey. So I will just take you up now to show you your rooms. Say good night to your great-uncle, there's good children.'

The twins solemnly shook hands with Great-Uncle James once more and wished him good night. Great-Uncle James evidently did not expect to be kissed, and they felt relieved at that. They privately thought that what with his bushy eyebrows and big, bristly moustache he did not look very kissable.

As soon as the door was closed, Great-Uncle James flung down *Little Folks* and took up *The Times* with a snort of relief.

Great-Aunt Susan led the way up the wide, shallow stairs to the first floor.

'There are still some more stairs to climb,' she said.

The twins looked round in surprise, for the stairs seemed to have come to an end on a large landing with nothing but closed doors. But Great-Aunt Susan opened one of the doors, and instead of a room it led them into a passage, and a little way along the passage there was another, narrower, staircase leading upwards. This brought them to a smaller landing with only four doors, one of which stood invitingly open.

'Here is your bedroom, with a little sitting-room opening out of it, all for yourselves,' said Great-Aunt Susan. 'And here is Mary, who will look after you instead of Nurse.'

Mary, a plump, rosy-cheeked housemaid, was just putting away the last of the unpacked clothes.

'Good evening, missies,' she said with a pleasant smile.

The twins replied politely, but for the first time looked a little dissatisfied.

Great-Aunt Susan noticed this, but mistook the meaning of it.

'Of course you'll miss Nurse at first, dears,' she said kindly, 'but I'm sure Mary will do all she can for you.'

'Yes, surely,' said Mary heartily.

The twins grew a little red in their anxiety to make themselves understood without sounding ungrateful towards Mary.

'Please, Great-Aunt Susan,' said Celia hesitatingly, 'we are so big now we thought we could look after ourselves.'

'We've been practising *hard*,' said Delia earnestly. 'We can bath ourselves, really and truly.'

'And brush our hair quite well and tidy,' added Celia, with more truth than grammar.

'Of course, dear children, you shall look after yourselves then,' said Great-Aunt Susan smiling. 'I had forgotten that eight years old could be so clever! You see it is a *very* long time since I was eight!'

'Yes, it *must* be!' agreed the twins candidly as they gazed at Great-Aunt Susan's delicately-lined face and silvery hair.

'Indeed it is!' said Great-Aunt Susan. 'Why, I remember your grandmother, your father's mother, when she was eight! She was my younger sister, you know, and so that is how your father is my nephew.'

The twins nodded solemnly. They knew Great-Aunt Susan was Daddy's aunt.

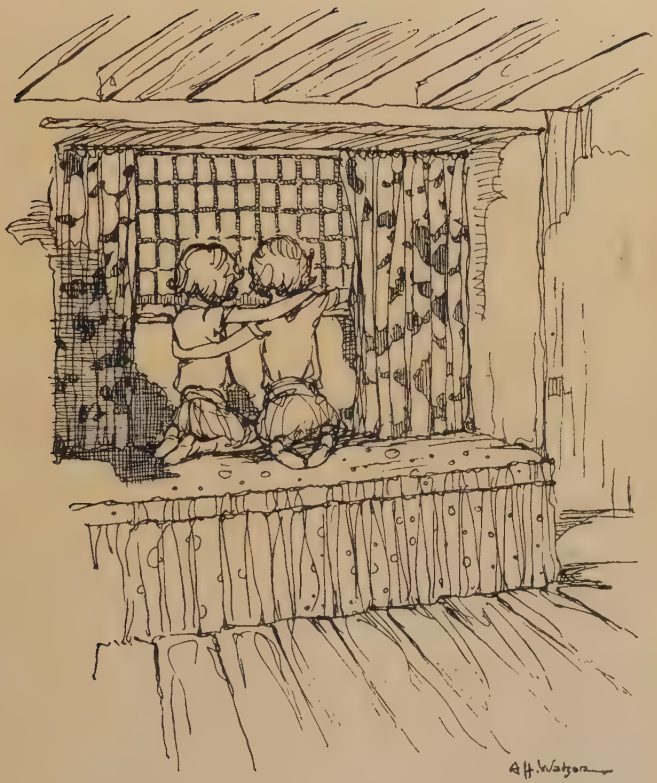
'Well, well, I mustn't start talking of old days now,' said Great-Aunt Susan, 'for it is high time you were off to bed! Then you shall look after yourselves as much as you please, and Mary will always be ready to help if you want her. And she is going to sleep in the little room beyond, so you won't feel lonely at night, will you?'

The twins assured her earnestly that they wouldn't.

'You see, we're always two together,' said Celia.

'That's the best of being twins,' said Delia.

'It must be very nice being twins,' said Great-Aunt Susan kindly 'I suppose you always do everything together?'



--- SAW A MASS OF
TREES IN THE DISTANCE.

'Yes, *always*,' replied the twins.

After Great-Aunt Susan had kissed them and wished them good night and happy dreams, and Mary had gone downstairs to fetch their supper, the twins went to the window and looked out over the lawns and the fields beyond to the mass of trees in the distance. They suddenly felt rather tired after their long day, and perhaps a little homesick too, as one is apt to do in a strange place at bed-time, and they remained silent, each with an arm about the other.

Then Mary reappeared with a tray of bread and butter and creamy milk.

'Is that a wood, please?' asked Celia suddenly, pointing to the distant trees, which had turned a brilliant emerald green under the light of the evening sun. 'Daddy didn't tell us about a wood.'

Mary came and stood beside them.

'Yes, that's a wood, a rarely pretty wood,' she said 'Wizen Wood it's called.'

'Wizen Wood,' repeated Celia; 'how funny!'

'Why 's it called Wizen Wood?' asked Delia.

'It 's just its name,' replied Mary comfortably.

CHAPTER II

THE FIRST MORNING

THE twins slept so well all night long that they woke to find the sun streaming in at the windows and Mary coming smiling in at the door.

When they heard it was past eight o'clock they were much annoyed with themselves for sleeping so long.

'We meant to get up *so* early!' said Celia disappointedly.

'And explore all round!' said Delia.

'Dearie me!' said Mary, 'you've plenty of time before you for your exploring. And a good long night's sleep was what you needed after your travelling and all. And are you feeling nice and rested this morning?'

For answer the twins promptly threw back the bedclothes and sprang out of their beds exactly at the same moment ('for all the world like two dancers at the pantomime!' as Mary told the kitchen party afterwards).

They gently but firmly refused Mary's offers of help, and in quite a short time they had washed and brushed and dressed themselves, and were ready to go downstairs, looking as neat as possible in clean yellow linen frocks. They descended the little staircase into the passage.

'That's the door we came through!' said Delia, pointing to the right.

'Yes, I know,' said Celia. 'But let's just look at what is at the other end.'

So they explored the other end of the passage and found another wooden staircase leading down towards sounds of bustling about and clattering of dishes.

'That's the kitchen way!' said Celia.

Having satisfied their curiosity, they went back along the passage, opened the door at the far end, and found them-

selves on the big landing with the main staircase. They were just starting to walk sedately down when Celia's eyes fixed themselves on the wide, smooth wooden rail of the banisters.

'Delia!' she said joyfully, and balancing herself over it proceeded to slide down.

'Ooh! lovely!' cried Delia, and the next moment she went slithering after Celia.

They were perfect banisters to slide down. There were no wooden knobs to form obstacles at the turn of the stairs, but the rail went with a smooth, rounded curve which pleasantly increased the speed of the traveller. With one accord the twins, who had collided with a bump at the bottom, turned and sped up the stairs again, and then down they shot once more with squeals of delight.

'It's like a sort of flying!' gasped Celia after their next collision.

'Yes, exactly!' gasped Delia, and they raced up to the top once more.

But as they went down for the third time a loud snorting kind of noise startled them just as they reached the bottom, and they let go quickly, losing their balance and rolling off the last two steps on to the floor of the hall. The snorting noise turned into shouts of 'Susan! Susan!', and, scrambling to their feet, the twins looked rather nervously upwards and saw Great-Uncle James standing champing at the top of the stairs.

Great-Aunt Susan came running out, in a soft grey dressing-gown with a lace frill at the neck.

'What is the matter, James?' she asked anxiously.

'Those children!' roared Great-Uncle James, 'killing themselves! killing themselves!' and he pointed to the twins, who held each other's hand for support.

'What is it, children? Are you hurt?' cried Great-Aunt Susan.

'No, not a bit, thank you!' they both answered together hastily; and then came up the stairs hand-in-hand to reassure her.

'Well, they deserve to be, that's all I can say!' spluttered Great-Uncle James. 'Do you know what they were doing? Sliding down the banisters!' And he snorted again.

'Oh no! Oh, my dears, how dreadful!' cried Great-Aunt Susan, very much shocked. 'What could have made you *think* of such a thing? Little girls *never* slide down banisters. I'm sure you never slide down banisters at home!'

'We used to,' said Celia, 'till Daddy and Mummy said we weren't to 'cause it was dangerous,' she added honestly.

'But, my dears,' said Great-Aunt Susan, looking much distressed, 'surely it was very naughty of you to do it here when you have been told not to at home?'

'But we didn't think it was dangerous here,' explained Celia.

'They're such much nicer banisters here,' explained Delia.

'Pshaw!' exploded Great-Uncle James, whereupon the twins stared at him with big, surprised eyes, wondering how he made such funny noises.

'It's very dangerous indeed,' said Great-Aunt Susan earnestly. 'Why, you might have been killed, you know. You must never, never do such a thing again. Promise me you won't!'

'We promise,' said Celia sadly, and Delia echoed her.

'There's good children!' said Great-Aunt Susan in a tone of relief, for it hurt her tender heart to have to find fault with her little stranger great-nieces the very first morning. 'And now, don't you think, dears,' she added tactfully, 'that you would like Mary to help you to tidy your hair a little?'

'No thank you, Great-Aunt Susan,' replied the twins,

rather surprised at the question when they remembered their tidy reflections in the glass upstairs. But then, glancing at each other, they realized immediately that that tidy appearance had not managed to survive sliding downstairs and tumbling on to the floor.

'We'll go up and brush it again!' exclaimed Celia eagerly. 'We did *start* tidy!'

'Yes, we really did!' added Delia.

'There's good children!' repeated Great-Aunt Susan, as they slipped past and through the passage door once more. And then she hurried back into her room to put on her dress, and Great-Uncle James stumped downstairs and into the library still snorting and muttering to himself something that sounded like 'Amuse themselves quietly! Not know they are about the place, indeed!'

A few minutes later the gong sounded, very soft to begin with and growing louder and louder to a musical roar, and then gradually less and less till it faded away. Parker always did the gong exactly as a gong ought to be done, and no one enjoyed the sound of it more than he did himself. The twins walked downstairs at a sober pace and found Great-Aunt Susan waiting for them in the hall. She kissed them both as if she had quite forgotten they had met already that morning.

'I hope you slept very well, and are quite ready for your breakfasts?' she said kindly.

And the twins, who were now beautifully tidy about the hair, said: 'Yes, thank you, Great-Aunt Susan,' very demurely.

'Come, then,' said Great-Aunt Susan, and she led the way into a large, panelled room with chairs and sofas covered in rather faded flowered chintzes, and cupboards with glass doors holding brightly-coloured old china, and old-fashioned portraits on the walls, and many other interesting things, as the twins could see as they glanced

round. 'This is the drawing-room,' she told them, 'and now we go through this way.' This was a doorway to the left, which brought them to another smaller room, with book-cases covered over with a kind of metal trellis-work, and a round table in the bow-window, but no signs of breakfast upon it. 'This is the morning-room,' said Great-Aunt Susan, 'and here we are at the dining-room!' They crossed the morning-room and went through the opposite doorway into another large panelled room, where breakfast and Great-Uncle James were waiting for them.

'What an int'resting way to the dining-room!' remarked Celia.

'At home we just go straight into ours,' said Delia.

'This is such an old, old house, you see,' said Great-Aunt Susan, 'and old houses were usually built with the rooms opening out of one another like this. This house was built when Queen Elizabeth was Queen of England. Just think what a long time ago!'

'Yes,' said the twins, with comfortable vagueness as to how many hundred years ago that might be.

Then they all sat down to breakfast, the twins, one on either side of Great-Aunt Susan, eating new-laid eggs and toast and rolls and honey as if they had picked up country appetites already; while Great-Uncle James ate kedgeree and ham, and told Great-Aunt Susan what annoying letters he had had this morning and what a poor ham it was compared with the last; and Great-Aunt Susan poured out coffee and said soothing things to Great-Uncle James, and ate just a very little herself in between.

After breakfast the twins did not forget their promise to write a letter the very first morning to Daddy and Mummy in Switzerland. So they went upstairs to find their pencils and lined paper, and then they took them into their own sitting-room and sat very close side by side at the table. And this is how the twins wrote a letter.

Celia began: 'Dere Daddy and Mummy;' then she pushed the paper to Delia,who wrote: 'We hop you are quite well.' Then Celia went on: 'This is a nice place.' Then Delia: 'The jurney was very long.' Then Celia: 'Nanny cort her trane back agane.' Then Delia: 'Bolton came to meat us and let us do the horn.' Then Celia: 'We like Grate Arnt Susan.' Then Delia: 'Grate Unkel James is funy.' Then Celia: 'We hop Swizaland is a nice place.' And then they felt they had written enough, so they ended up: 'With hepes and hepes of love. Celia. Delia.' After which they each added a long row of large kisses, and the letter was carefully folded and put into an envelope for Great-Aunt Susan to write the long and difficult address in ink.

'There's good children!' said Great-Aunt Susan when they gave her the letter, and she addressed and stamped it, and the twins put it into the carved wooden box in the hall to wait for the postman's afternoon visit; because there was no pillar-box or post office within two miles of Andesley Hall.

Then Great-Aunt Susan tied on a shady garden hat with black ribbons under her chin, which made her look like an old-fashioned picture, and said now she must take them out to see the gardens. They did not go out by the front door, but along a passage which turned a corner and led them past a little conservatory and out by another door on to the terrace in front of the drawing-room windows, where there were great stone vases, planted with heliotrope, standing at intervals all along by the parapet, and stone steps leading down to the largest, smoothest lawn the children had ever seen. They crossed the lawn, slanting to the left, and under the shade of a large old acacia tree, and then by a tiny path which twisted round and brought them to a little gate, arched over with rose bushes all covered with masses of little white roses. And

then, passing through the gateway, they found themselves in the loveliest old garden. There were roses of all sorts and colours, from the tall ones climbing to the top of the high south wall to the small bushes with the tiniest little pink flowers on them. There were white lilies, and red and pink carnations, and tall blue delphiniums just beginning to go over, and still taller pink and white and yellow hollyhocks just coming out. There were clumps of purple lavender and gay coloured phloxes, and low borders of mignonette, and high hedges of sweet peas, and ever so many others.

Great-Aunt Susan went slowly round the paths, sometimes stopping to admire a particularly lovely bloom, sometimes removing a withered flower with gentle fingers, while the twins skipped from side to side sniffing up the scents of the different flowers and painting their little snub noses as yellow as their frocks with pollen from the white lilies.

Presently a stern-looking, grey-bearded gardener came into the garden, and Great-Aunt Susan said:

'Good-morning, Saunders; these are Mr. Peter's daughters who have come to pay us a visit.'

But Saunders, who was not used to having his garden invaded by children, merely said: 'Good-morning, missies,' in rather a surly tone, and looked at them with suspicion.

'You mustn't mind Saunders, dear children, if he sounds a little cross,' Great-Aunt Susan explained after he had moved away. 'His bark is worse than his bite!'

But the twins privately thought it would be better to keep as far away from Saunders as possible.

'And now, my dears,' said Great-Aunt Susan presently, 'it is eleven o'clock, and I think that is a good time to go and see the kitchen garden and have some raspberries, don't you?'

And the twins gave two little skips of delight and said they did.

So Great-Aunt Susan led them out by a gate at the opposite end of the garden to the way they came in, and down a short bit of path which brought them on to the drive quite near the house. Crossing the drive, they went down a winding path between high laurels, and so came to the green wooden door set in the high walls of the kitchen garden.

It was an enormous garden, with glass houses for grapes and tomatoes, and fruit trees growing up the walls, and rows and rows of all sorts of vegetables, and currant bushes and gooseberry bushes and other bushes, everything, in fact, that one could wish to see in the nicest kitchen garden. Great-Aunt Susan left the twins inside the netted enclosure that protected the raspberries, saying to their great surprise that she did not want any herself, and went down the path to talk to another gardener who was digging potatoes. The raspberries were red and ripe and juicy, and the children made the most of their time.

After what she considered a suitable interval, Great-Aunt Susan returned, and said, very delicately:

'Perhaps, dear children, it would be better to stop now in case you should have no appetites for luncheon.'

And though the twins felt quite sure that no amount of raspberries could spoil their appetites, they stopped at once and came out readily.

'There's good children! I hope the raspberries were nice?' said Great-Aunt Susan.

And the twins replied with beaming smiles:

'Goluptious, thank you!'—an expression which their great-aunt concluded they must have learnt from their father.

'I must go indoors now to write some letters,' said Great-Aunt Susan, as they reached the drive again. 'But you

will be quite happy amusing yourselves about the gardens, won't you, my dears? You may go wherever you please, but always remember to shut the gates of the garden after you, else rabbits might get in and do terrible damage.'

The twins promised to be very careful, and then Great-Aunt Susan returned to the house and left them to their own devices.

First they wandered through the flower garden again, and sat for a little time on a wooden garden seat, swinging their bare legs in the hot sunshine, and watching the fat bumble-bees and the light, bright butterflies among the flowers. But sitting still never lasted very long with them, and soon they wandered on, out by the rose-covered gate and down by a tennis court, and into a little brown summer-house by the door and out again by the window, and so on, exploring happily all round till they came upon something which made them stop and clap their hands with delight. A steep, sloping grass bank led down to a long narrow bowling-alley of beautifully green and smooth turf, with a line of small fir trees on the opposite side. The twins did not know it was a bowling-alley, nor did they care. What filled them with sudden gladness was the grass bank. Hurling themselves down at the top, they rolled rapturously over and over till they came to an abrupt stop on the level. Then they sprang to their feet and went scrambling up the steep slope and down once more, over and over and over again, rolling and tumbling and screaming with joy. On and on they went, their hair growing more and more touzled, their yellow frocks growing greener and greener, and the grass on the other hand, particularly where they landed and jumped for joy before clambering up to the top again, growing rather less green and showing unmistakable signs of wear and tear.

Suddenly they heard loud and angry shouts; and,

picking themselves up as quickly as they could, they faced in the direction of the shouts, which they feared, rightly, were intended for them.

There, at the entrance to the bowling-alley, stood Great-Uncle James and Saunders, side by side, glaring indignantly upon them. The twins once more clutched each other's hand and stood waiting for what was to come.

'What on earth are you children doing now?' roared Great-Uncle James, looking rather like an indignant turkey.

'Rolling down the bank,' answered Celia in a small voice.

And, to support Celia, Delia repeated: 'Rolling down the bank,' in a still smaller voice.

'Rolling down the bank! Ruining the grass!' gobbled Great-Uncle James. 'Don't you know that this is a bowling-green? Don't you know a bowling-green must be kept in perfect order without a mark on it?'

The twins hadn't known either of these things, and they gazed back anxiously at Great-Uncle James and shook their heads slightly.

'And Saunders was just bringing me down to see how well the turf looked! And just look at it now!' exclaimed Great-Uncle James; and he and Saunders looked and made groaning sounds, and the twins looked and felt terribly guilty.

'We're *very* sorry, Great-Uncle James,' said Celia.

'Dreadfully sorry, Great-Uncle James,' said Delia.

Great-Uncle James grunted gloomily, and Saunders looked as if this was what came of having children about, and only what he had expected.

'Well, I'll leave it to you, Saunders,' said Great-Uncle James, after they had stood some time in awful silence. 'Just do the best you can. And you children had better come along with me. Just on lunch time. Keep you out of mischief! Keep you out of mischief!'

He led the way off the grass by a short path which ended in the drive, and the twins followed meekly and silently behind.

As they went into the house they met Great-Aunt Susan in the hall, who held up her hands in horror at the twins' touzled and green appearance.

'Oh! what has happened to you, my dears?' she cried. 'James, *what* has happened?'

Great-Uncle James explained with some warmth what had happened.

'Oh dear! oh dear!' said Great-Aunt Susan; 'what a dreadful mistake!' And she looked at her great-nieces in a puzzled, worried manner as if they were not turning out quite what she had expected little girls to be.

'We're *very* sorry,' said Celia penitently.

'*Very* sorry,' echoed Delia.

'Oh yes, I'm sure you are, dear children, and I'm not angry with you. And your great-uncle isn't angry,' Great-Aunt Susan added, with a rather uncertain look at Great-Uncle James's face, which still had a purple tinge. 'We know you didn't *mean* to do any harm. But you will never, never roll down that bank again, will you? You see it is such very precious grass there!'

The twins promised that they never would.

'There's good children!' said Great-Aunt Susan. But her tone sounded a little doubtful this time, while Great-Uncle James snorted aloud at this description of them.

And the twins went upstairs rather quietly and sadly to put on clean frocks for lunch.

CHAPTER III

THE SECRET DELL

IT was after lunch, and Great-Uncle James was asleep in the library with a large, coloured silk handkerchief spread over his face. Suddenly—bump!—he woke with a start and a loud exclamation, for something had bounced against the glass of the window. He did not even need to look out to discover what it was, for memories of nearly thirty years ago revived and told him.

'Susan! Susan!' shouted Great-Uncle James wrathfully, jumping to his feet with unusual agility.

'Yes dear, coming!' answered Great-Aunt Susan, and, hastily rising from the drawing-room sofa, she came trotting rather breathlessly into the library to see what was the matter.

'Look at that!' cried Great-Uncle James, purple in the face with indignation, and pointing out of the window. 'Balls! two balls! Being chucked about within a yard of the house! Every window in the place will be broken!'

Great-Aunt Susan looked out, and, sure enough, there were the twins, each with a brightly coloured ball which they were bouncing on the drive to see which would go the highest. They were happily unconscious whose window Delia's ball had bounced against a minute before.

Great-Aunt Susan tapped on the glass and shook her head in a warning manner. Then she hurried to the front door and down the steps.

'Oh, my dears!' she exclaimed to the waiting twins, 'you mustn't play with balls so near to the house. You might break one of the windows!'

'Oh no, Great-Aunt Susan!' said Celia reassuringly. 'They're *quite* soft balls!'

'*Quite* soft!' echoed Delia, and they held out the rubber balls for her to feel.

'Oh yes, dears, I'm sure they are!' said Great-Aunt Susan in worried tones. 'I'm sure you wouldn't play with horrid hard balls like——'. She was going to say 'Like your father played with,' but hurriedly changed to 'like *boys* play with. But your great-uncle dislikes *all* balls so much, and one hit his window just now and disturbed him.'

The twins glanced guiltily up at the window, and there was Great-Uncle James's indignant countenance looking down upon them.

'Oh, we're *very* sorry!' said Celia hastily. 'We'll go *much* farther away!'

'Yes,' said Delia, quickly turning away from the house and looking to the farthest point in the opposite direction. 'May we go out there?' and she waved her hand towards Wizen Wood.

'Certainly, dear children,' said Great-Aunt Susan, who supposed they meant the fields near at hand. 'Just go wherever you please. All the ground about here belongs to your great-uncle, so you will always be quite safe—so long as you never go out of the drive gates on to the high road!' she added anxiously.

But the twins assured her that they would never do that.

Then, to please Great-Aunt Susan, they ran upstairs to fetch shady hats to protect them from the hot afternoon sun.

'There's good children!' she said hopefully as they came down hand-in-hand. 'You *will* be good and careful, won't you?'

'Oh yes, Great-Aunt Susan!'

'And shut every gate after you!'

'Oh yes, Great-Aunt Susan!'

'And if you go by the Home Farm, promise you won't go *near* the pond!'

The twins promised faithfully not to go near the pond, and then they set off soberly down the wide path with the front lawn and its clumps of rhododendrons on one side and the tall yew hedge, clipped at the top into queer figures of birds, on the other; while Great-Aunt Susan stood in the shade of the house watching them and wondering if it was really safe to allow them out of sight alone.

'Their mother said they were independent children who could always amuse themselves,' she said to herself. 'And it might have hurt their feelings if I had sent Mary with them. They certainly do seem independent; only their ways of amusing themselves are not *quite* what I expected. I fear I am very ignorant about children. It is a sad pity that their nurse could not come with them!' However, she felt reassured by the very sedate appearance the twins presented as they passed out of her sight, and after a moment or two more she returned indoors.

'The dear children have gone off for a little walk together,' she put her head round the library door to tell Great-Uncle James. 'They are always *so* good and reasonable the moment they are told not to do a thing. I feel sure they will soon settle down into our ways and not give *any* trouble!'

Great-Uncle James, who was comfortably settled in his arm-chair once more, gave a loud grunt; but whether it was caused by his opinion of the twins, or was merely the first of a series of loud snores, his wife did not feel quite certain. Hoping it was the latter, she gently shut the door and departed on tip-toe to the drawing-room.

Meanwhile the twins walked steadily on, past the farmyard, not even stopping to inspect the chickens and ducks; past the pond away on their left, which looked so cool and inviting with the soft green willows reflected in the water; across a meadow with sweet-smelling clover, where one

or two sleepy cows looked at them with large eyes; and along a narrow pathway by the side of a field of yellowing corn. And as they went their spirits, which had been rather cast down for a little, began reviving wonderfully. Presently they climbed a stile into a large field which sloped away towards the middle and then up again the farther side. The grass was cropped short, the ground had a pleasant springy feel, and Great-Uncle James was left far behind.

'Let's skip-hop!' cried Celia.

'Yes, let's!' cried Delia.

And, still hand-in-hand, the twins went skip-hopping merrily down the field.

Everybody knows how to skip-hop, only perhaps some people have different names for it. In fact some simply call it skipping, but the twins considered that skipping needed a skipping-rope and did not carry you over the ground nearly so well as skip-hopping. This is the way of it; first on one leg, then the other, beginning with quite short skip-hops and getting to longer and longer ones the faster you go, till sooner or later you have to stop quite tired and out-of-breath, or else, especially when going downhill, lose your balance and topple forward on to your nose, as the twins did this time. But as they fell on to some soft hay lying beside a haystack they didn't hurt themselves a bit. They just rolled over on to their backs and lay there, crimson-cheeked and panting, their hats flung aside.

It was so hot that they could see the air quivering at the edge of the field against the darker green of the hedgerow, and so still that the only sound was the chirring of the grasshoppers. The twins gave little contented grunts, settled themselves with a few wriggles well into the hay, and closed their eyes.

Presently Celia sat up.

'It's funny,' she remarked pensively as she removed the

hay from her hair, 'but when you start lying in hay it's more comf'table than when you end.'

'Yes,' agreed Delia, still without moving, however. 'The more you sink in, the more you find the prickles.'

'Let's go on to the wood now,' said Celia. For they had determined to get to the wood that Mary had said was so pretty.

Delia sat up and gazed ahead.

'It still looks a long way away, doesn't it?' she said sleepily.

'Yes, it does,' confessed Celia. 'That 's why we'd better hurry, else we shan't be able to stay there long.'

This thought made them both jump up, pull on their hats firmly, and set off with great determination. There was no skip-hopping now, for the slope was all uphill, and they trudged slowly along under the hot afternoon sun, growing hotter and hotter at every step.

'I'm boiling!' observed Celia.

'So'm I!' said Delia.

They began dragging their feet wearily, but they still kept doggedly on, for when they had made up their minds to a thing they hated to be beaten.

'Walking 's such a dull thing,' complained Celia. 'Don't you wish we could just *slither* along instead, or something like that?'

'I know,' agreed Delia earnestly, 'something like sliding down banisters, or rolling down banks. It would be lovely!'

'But we'd probably be stopped from doing it, even if we could!' Celia added rather gloomily.

They trailed on in silence, thinking deeply about the unaccountable ways of grown-ups.

At last they reached a five-barred gate and squeezed through the narrow bit that was all they could manage to tug open. Pushing it to and fastening it with a great effort,

they turned and found only one narrow strip of rough ground between them and the wood. They quickened their steps hopefully, and in another few minutes they passed from the rough, open ground and glaring sunlight into the cool, green shady world of Wizen Wood.

A narrow path went winding invitingly into the heart of the wood, and the twins followed it eagerly, pulling off their hats and rumpling up the hair from their hot foreheads, while they breathed in the delicious, reviving coolness, and listened to the soft and rather husky croo-crooing of the wood-pigeons in the tops of the trees.

An unknown wood is one of the most mysterious and interesting places in the world. There is no knowing how far its paths may go, nor where they may lead you, nor what they may show you. And so the children wandered on, silent and blissful, into this wood, where the ground was soft and mossy under their feet, and the green boughs sometimes met together over their heads, and sometimes left gaps of beautiful blue sky. And the farther they went the more lovely the wood seemed to grow. There were tall, pinky-purple foxgloves between the tree trunks, and clumps of green fern, and pink and white convolvulus trailing carelessly on the ground or climbing high upon the trees, and many pretty little woodland flowers the twins had never seen before.

Every now and then the other inhabitants of the wood showed themselves. A rabbit or two scuttled quickly across the path and disappeared again. A heavy wood-pigeon flopped from tree to tree just overhead. A robin came hopping out from behind a bush, eyed them for a few moments with his head on one side, and then disdainfully turned his back and hopped away again. Then presently Celia turned round with finger on lips, and Delia, following her gaze, saw a little red squirrel almost within reach of them. They stood still and breathless with

delight while it started to run up the trunk of a tree and then paused half-way up to stare at them resentfully as if to say: 'Get out of my wood!' And when they did not move it waved its tail furiously and fled to the top of the tree in great indignation. The children gazed eagerly up into the mass of soft green, but could see nothing more of him.

All this time Delia had been carrying her ball.

'Shall I throw it up very, *very* gently?' she whispered. 'Not to hit it, of course, but just to touch the branches and make it move again?'

Celia nodded; so, very softly, Delia threw up her ball. But there was no further sound or movement up above. Either the squirrel had gone skipping off unseen at the tops of the trees, or he knew himself quite safe on his high perch and did not mean to stir. But the ball had glanced off against a bough and gone bouncing away into the undergrowth, and the twins, after waiting a few moments in vain for another sight of the squirrel, had to follow in search. For some minutes they lifted branches and crawled under bushes and squeezed through difficult ways where they were whipped by twigs and caught by brambles; and yet they could not find the ball.

'I do hope it isn't lost!' said Delia rather dolefully at last.

'Oh no, it can't be *really* lost!' said Celia cheerfully.

'There isn't any long grass here to lose things in. I expect it's just rolled a long way.' She pushed bravely through a specially prickly bit and then gave a little exclamation. 'Oh, Delia! Look!'

Delia hastily pushed her way through to join Celia, and then they both stood gazing wide-eyed. There lay the blue-and-red ball indeed, but neither child hurried to pick it up. For it lay in the loveliest, most delightful dimple in the wood, a little hollow place of greenest grass and sweet-

scented thyme, with little graceful ferns growing at the edge, the whole being surrounded and shut in by tall flowering bushes, sweet-briar, elder, bramble, honeysuckle, and one strange-looking shrub with pale blue flowers and clusters of green and brown berries.

'Oh! What a *darling* little secret place!' the children cried with one voice; and next moment they were down in the lovely, tiny dell, stretching their tired limbs luxuriously on the soft ground and sighing with satisfaction.

The blue-blossomed sprays reached out over their heads, and the wood-pigeons in the tops of the trees called to one another, Croooo croooo croooo, croo croo: croooo croooo croooo, croo croo: croooo croooo croooo, croo croo.

Presently Celia stirred sleepily.

'I wish we hadn't got to walk all that way back!' she murmured. 'I *do* wish we could go along by some nicer, quicker way than just walking!'

'So do I,' murmured Delia dreamily.

And then they fell asleep.

CHAPTER IV

SKIPPITING

Would ye scorn the weary ground?
(Croo croo)
Rub your heels with berries brown'd.
(Croo croo)
Then henceforward skip at will
Over level, over hill,
Skipping, skimming lightly still,
(Croo croo).
Till the touch of water soon,
(Croo croo)
Or the time of darkling moon,
(Croo croo)
Makes the glamour and the glee
And the magic vanish free
Both from heels and memory.
(Croo croo.)

THE twins heard these words in their dreams mingled with the crooling of the wood-pigeons; or they dreamed they heard the words, whichever it might be. Drowsily, half-awake, they raised their arms and broke off little clusters of brown berries from the sprays above their heads. Then they woke completely and sat up staring at each other.

'Did you dream it too?' they exclaimed together in wide-eyed amazement, both holding the berries in their outstretched hands.

'The poetry?' said Celia.

'Yes!' nodded Delia.

'Rub our heels with berries brown'd,' quoted Celia eagerly.

'Yes! And then skip at will over level, over hill!' cried Delia.

'But what does it *mean*?' they asked each other wonderingly. And then: 'Let's try!' they cried together excitedly; and, pulling off their sandals, they rubbed their heels vigorously with the brown berries crushed in their hands. Then they examined them to see if there was any difference at all; but their pink heels looked exactly the same as usual.

'Of course it was only a dream,' said Celia hesitatingly.

'Yes, of course,' said Delia, 'but still——'

'Let's try!' they exclaimed together again, and, putting on their sandals, they stood up.

'My feet feel just the same,' observed Celia rather disappointedly.

'So do mine,' said Delia. 'But then we haven't tried to skip yet!'

'Shall we wait till we get out of the wood and then try?' suggested Celia, feeling somehow as if she would like to get back on to more ordinary ground first. And Delia, who felt just the same, agreed with her.

Delia picked up her ball, and then they pushed their way back to the path, seized their hats which had been left lying there, and hurried along the way they had come, never pausing till they came out on to the open ground once more.

'Now!' they said together, taking hands; and, rather slowly and doubtfully, they began skip-hopping. It was just the same as usual at first, and then—somehow it felt as if their heels were full of quicksilver, and before they quite realized what was happening they were going skip-hopping along without any effort of their own. Up and down and over the ground they went, and their heels were doing it all for them. It was the most lovely and exciting feeling to be carried along like that!

'Oh! oh! oh!' they cried in little wondering screams of delight.

"OH, ISN'T IT LOVELY!"
A.H.Watson.

Then, as they reached the gate, they stopped as naturally as if they had been walking along in the most ordinary manner. They stood still for a moment, staring at each other in their excited amazement.

'Oh, Delia!' gasped Celia, 'it's—it's wonderful!'

'Oh, Celia!' gasped Delia, 'it's—it's like dreams!'

'I suppose it *isn't* dreams still?' said Celia, suddenly doubtful for a moment.

But they both pinched themselves and then each other, and decided that, no! it was absolutely really and truly happening.

'Oh, do let's do it again!' they cried, and slipping through the gate with all speed they took hands once more, and off they went again. And again the same thing happened. It began by being ordinary skip-hopping, and then, once started, their heels did the rest. The twins skipped along just as if they were mechanical toys which had been wound up to go, only they went more gracefully and gaily than any mechanical toys, and they did not need winding up every few minutes. In fact, when they had wound themselves up by starting, it seemed as if they could go on for ever.

They sped down the big field and past the haystack; and now surely their difficulty would come when they must go up the long slope down which they had skip-hopped so energetically earlier in the afternoon! But, downhill or up, it was all the same. Up the slope they skipped, with not an atom of effort to themselves!

'Oh, isn't it lovely! oh, isn't it lovely! oh, isn't it lovely!' the twins sang together at the top of their voices as they went.

When they reached the stile they perched on it to rest; not from tiredness, of which they did not feel one scrap, but from excitement, which was making their hearts beat fast.

They both gave enormous sighs of sheer joy.

'Will it go on?' asked Delia with eager anxiety. 'Oh, Celia! will it go on?'

'Oh, I do *hope* so!' sighed Celia.

They tried to remember what they had really heard in their dream, and discovered that they could repeat the lines quite easily:

> Till the touch of water soon,
> Or the time of darkling moon,
> Makes the glamour and the glee
> And the magic vanish free
> Both from heels and memory.

And somehow, although the words sounded rather difficult, the children were able to understand their meaning quite clearly.

'The touch of water,' Celia repeated. 'That means we mustn't wash our heels,' she added firmly.

'No, never!' said Delia quite happily.

'But I wonder when the time of darkling moon will be?' said Celia.

'That's when the old moon has waned and gone right away,' remarked Delia.

'Oh, I do hope that won't be for simply ages!' exclaimed Celia. 'How ever can we find out?'

'From the way it looks,' said Delia wisely. 'You know,' and she quoted the verse their mother had taught them one evening:

> O lady Moon, your horns point to the East;
> Shine, be increased!
> O lady Moon, your horns point to the West;
> Wane, be at rest!

'But I don't *know* how it's pointing, nor do you!' protested Celia. 'We haven't seen the moon for ever so long.'

'No,' confessed Delia, 'nor we have!'

Their eyes wandered all round the sky as well as they could for the bright sunshine, but there was certainly no sign of the moon to be seen just then.

'We'll ask Great-Aunt Susan——', began Celia, and then she jumped suddenly to the ground.

'Ooh!' she exclaimed, 'I'd quite forgotten about time and everything! Do you think it's tea-time?'

Delia jumped down too.

'Oh, let's hurry!' she said rather nervously, 'or Great-Uncle James will be cross again!'

'We'll get back very quick with the new skip-hopping!' said Celia cheeringly.

Off they set again, and reached the clovery meadow in no time and skipped across it, while the cows stared harder than ever to see the unusual way in which two small human beings were covering the ground. When they neared the farm they thought it wiser to tread the earth in a more every-day manner in case of meeting people, so they ran hand-in-hand past the farmyard and on through the gate, and back once more into the wide path between the yew hedge and the lawn which led them to the front door.

Parker was standing on the steps looking out for them, and the twins hurried up with rather a guilty air, fearing that they must be very late indeed.

'Tea is in the morning-room, missies,' he told them; and then added in a confidential voice: 'The master's still in the library, so if you get ready quick you'll be in time yet!'

'*Thank* you!' said the twins gratefully, and they scampered upstairs, and came down again, clean and tidy, in a marvellously short time.

'There's good children! just in nice time for tea!' said Great-Aunt Susan as they went into the drawing-room. 'Did you have a happy afternoon?'

'Yes, *very*, thank you, Great-Aunt Susan,' replied the

twins, trying to keep their voices as calm and ordinary as possible.

And Great-Aunt Susan patted their yellow heads kindly, and evidently did not notice any unusual air of excitement about them. Then Great-Uncle James came in, and they all went into the morning-room together, where tea was set out on the round table in the bow-window.

'And where did you go, my dears?' asked Great-Aunt Susan, after she had given cups of weak tea with plenty of sugar to the twins, and a cup of strong tea with no sugar to Great-Uncle James.

'To Wizen Wood,' replied Celia readily, with a glance at Delia that meant 'But we are never going to tell our lovely new secret, are we?'

'All the way to Wizen Wood!' exclaimed Great-Aunt Susan. 'Why, I never thought you would get so far as that! Aren't you very tired now, dear child?'

'Oh no, thank you!' said Celia, 'not a bit!'

'And what about Delia?' asked Great-Aunt Susan kindly, turning to her. For it had been settled at breakfast-time that Celia should always sit on Great-Aunt Susan's right hand and Delia on her left, so that at meals at any rate she should always know which was which.

'I'm not a bit tired either, thank you, Great-Aunt Susan,' said Delia demurely.

'Good walkers, hey!' said Great-Uncle James in his sudden way. 'I'm glad of that! Glad of that! No more sliding down banisters or rolling down banks, hey! Been walking on your own feet as nature intended?'

'Yes!—no!——,' the twins began together in some confusion, growing rather red at this unexpected question.

But Great-Aunt Susan, who thought they were overcome by this reference to their misdeeds of the morning, interrupted kindly, saying:

'Now, James, you mustn't tease the dear children! We

had quite forgotten about all that! And now they have had a long walk, and must be very hungry, even if they are not tired!' And she asked the twins which jam they would like with their bread and butter, gooseberry or strawberry, and they both chose strawberry without any hesitation, and then settled down to make a really good meal; for Great-Aunt Susan was quite right, they *were* hungry.

When they had eaten all the bread and jam and sponge cake they could manage, and were sitting back in their chairs feeling quite satisfied, Delia looked across at Celia with a meaning glance which then went up towards the sky, and Celia turned at once to Great-Aunt Susan.

'Please, Great-Aunt Susan, could you tell us about the moon?' she began.

'What do you want to know about the moon, my dear,' inquired Great-Aunt Susan, wondering rather anxiously if a deep knowledge of astronomy would be expected of her.

'What it's doing just now,' explained Celia.

'Whether it's waning or not,' put in Delia eagerly.

'Ah yes!' said Great-Aunt Susan happily, relieved at the easiness of the question after all. 'I think it must be waning now, my dears.'

The twins' faces fell at this unwelcome news.

'It was about full moon, I fancy, some days ago now,' went on Great-Aunt Susan. 'But your great-uncle will tell you from *The Times*. That always says what the moon is doing.'

'Hey?' said Great-Uncle James, who had been glancing at the afternoon post, just brought in by Parker, and not attending to the conversation.

Great-Aunt Susan explained what was wanted, so Great-Uncle James obligingly slit open the wrapper which held *The Times*, and opening the paper out widely looked for the news about the moon.

'H'm! ha! Full moon to-morrow,' he read out. 'That what you wanted to know, hey?' he asked the twins.

'Yes, thank you, Great-Uncle James,' they replied, cheering up very much at the news that it was not quite full moon yet.

'Then, please,' asked Celia, 'when will the old moon end?'

'When will the old moon end?' repeated Great-Uncle James. 'Why, in a fortnight from to-morrow, to be sure. And then the new moon starts!'

'Oh, thank you *very* much, Great-Uncle James,' said Celia gratefully; and she and Delia exchanged delighted looks across the table. A whole fortnight! That was as long as they were staying at Andesley Hall!

And Great-Uncle James, who thought the children were showing an intelligent thirst for general information, grunted at them quite approvingly for the first time, as he gathered up *The Times* and his letters to carry them off to the library.

Then Great-Aunt Susan asked the twins if they would like to stay in and rest, or go out with her into the garden again, and they both said: 'Oh, go out with you, please!'

So first they went round the flower garden, and the twins helped Great-Aunt Susan to pick sweet peas for the drawing-room. And then they went right across the great lawn in front of the terrace and stood at the far end looking back at the beautiful old house with its tall chimneys, which was such a wonderful red colour as the westering sun shone upon it. And then they sat in the little summer-house while Great-Aunt Susan told stories about the Hall in olden times. So, altogether, the time passed away very pleasantly, and though the twins had no opportunity of practising their new accomplishment they did not mind. In fact, it was rather an agreeable feeling to have something

so splendid at the back of their minds all the time and know they were only saving it up for later on.

But after they had said good night to Great-Aunt Susan and were on their way up to bed, they couldn't save it up any longer. The moment they had passed through the door leading from the main landing they began skip-hopping along the passage, and it was just the same there as out in the fields. They found themselves skipping and skimming without any trouble or effort, backwards and forwards, just avoiding the top of the kitchen stairs at one end, and just touching the door at the other. They went so lightly that their feet made no noise at all, and they were most careful not to call out, or even whisper to each other, though they were simply brimming over with enjoyment.

But, alas! Celia grew a little careless; and presently she skipped right on to the edge of the stairs, and, stopping suddenly, came down with a bump and pitched forward with a great clatter down the wooden steps. Luckily she managed to clutch the banisters and save herself from going right down head first; but the noise she made and the scream Delia gave when she saw her twin fall forward not only brought the kitchen party crowding up from below, and Mary running down from above, but, worst of all, Great-Uncle James, who was on his way to his room to dress for dinner, came bursting through the door from the landing to ask what on earth was the matter.

Celia scrambled up to the top of the stairs, rather ruefully rubbing her arm where it had banged against the banisters.

'Hey! What are you doing now?' cried Great-Uncle James, staring at them in amazement.

'G—going to bed,' answered the twins hesitatingly, while a confused murmur of sympathy came up from the group on the stairs.

'D'you always make that noise going to bed—ha?' demanded Great-Uncle James.

'I was tumbling downstairs,' confessed Celia.

And then Great-Aunt Susan came hurrying along the passage asking if anyone was hurt.

'But, dear children,' she said, after being relieved on this point, 'I thought you had gone up to bed *long* ago?' And then, as the twins hesitated, she looked at Mary for an explanation.

'I was waiting upstairs for the young ladies, mum,' said Mary. 'I thought they was still out in the garden. I only heard them this minute.'

'My heart came into my mouth when I heard that noise!' exclaimed the plump cook on the stairs. 'It's a mercy the child didn't break her bones tumbling on the hard steps, that it is!'

'But what were you *doing*, my dears?' asked Great-Aunt Susan.

The twins hung their heads a little and murmured that they had been playing in the passage and were very sorry.

'It's just children's ways, mum!' put in the cook; 'they must always be playing at something when it's bedtime!'

And Great-Uncle James snorted and muttered something about tumbling downstairs to start the day and tumbling downstairs again to end it!

The twins were thankful at last to be sent upstairs in Mary's charge, while the rest of the party dispersed in their different directions.

'Never mind, missies!' said Mary kindly as they reached the bedroom. 'Things are always new and exciting-like in a strange place, aren't they?'

And the twins agreed gratefully, though they did not explain just how new and exciting one thing was.

When Mary had brought their supper and run the bath

water she left them to look after themselves as on the night before, saying that she would be back to tuck them up in bed in half an hour.

And now a problem arose which had never occurred to the twins before. How were they to have their baths without letting the water touch their heels? They wrinkled their foreheads and considered the question very seriously. To go without baths altogether was, of course, out of the question, particularly when they were being trusted to put themselves to bed. They discussed slithering in head first and lying in the bath with their feet out of the water, but soon came to the conclusion that it would be difficult to get in and much more difficult to get out, and most difficult of all to wash properly.

'Besides, our hair would get all wet!' objected Delia.

'Of course,' said Celia, 'if it was only our hair we could wear our bathing caps.' For, as they were going straight on from Andesley Hall to stay with Uncle Jack and Aunt Laura at the seaside, all their bathing things had been brought with them.

Delia gave a sudden skip and exclamation of triumph.

'Our bathing *shoes*!' she cried. 'They're rubbery just like the caps, so they ought to keep our feet dry!'

'Oh, *good idea*!' cried Celia, and next moment they were scrabbling among their things to find the two pairs of little blue rubber beach shoes. They were soon discovered, and when pulled on proved to fit quite closely all round their heels. So they had their baths properly, and when they were dry and in their night-gowns they carefully filled the big soap-dish with water and dabbled their toes in that.

'Now, nobody could say we haven't washed our feet!' observed Celia in a satisfied tone.

They just skip-hopped lightly twice round the bedroom to make sure the magic was still working, and then by

the time Mary came in they were in their two little beds and feeling quite sleepy after such an exciting day.

But when Celia was almost asleep she was roused by Delia's voice.

'Celia, what does "vanish free both from heels and memory" mean exactly?'

'M'm!' said Celia, waking up a little. 'I s'pose it means we shouldn't remember how to do it if our heels were unmagicked.'

'Oh, is that what it means?' said Delia in a tone of relief. 'I was just wondering if it meant we should forget all about it altogether.'

'Why, how *could* we?' said Celia.

'I don't know,' murmured Delia.

A few minutes later she spoke again:

'Celia!'

'What is it?' said Celia sleepily.

'I've thought of a new name to call it, because it's a new thing, different from ordin'ry skip-hopping.'

'Yes?' murmured Celia inquiringly.

'Skippiting!' said Delia.

'Skippiting,' agreed Celia sleepily.

And that was their last word, for in another moment they were both fast asleep.

CHAPTER V

RAIN BEFORE SEVEN

'DELIA! *Delia!*' exclaimed Celia, waking and starting up in bed all in a moment.

'M'm,' replied Delia, more than half asleep.

'Wake *up*!' cried Celia. 'It's morning! And don't you remember about skippiting?'

Delia woke up suddenly at that.

'Skippiting!' she said excitedly, and in another instant they were both out of bed and skippiting gaily round and round the room.

'It's really true! it's really true!' they sang together as they skipped along, avoiding as well as they could the various pieces of furniture, until presently—thump!— over went a chair which Celia had knocked against.

They had quite forgotten about Mary in the little room beyond, but next moment a knock came at the door, which was then opened an inch or two, and Mary's voice said:

'What are you doing, missies? Get back into your beds, do, now! It's not half-past six and a wet morning.'

'A wet morning!' exclaimed the twins together with sudden dismay, and pattering across to the windows they gazed out. It was quite true. A soft fine rain was falling which could hardly be seen against the dark background of the yew hedge, but the drive was glistening with wet, and the sky was a soft unbroken grey which looked quite capable of concealing the sunshine for the whole day.

'Oh dear!' said the twins, and they returned to their beds quite disconsolately.

'That's right!' said Mary. 'And you'll stay in your beds till the proper time, won't you now?'

The twins unwillingly promised that they would.

'But, Mary,' called out Celia just as the door was closing, 'we may get out and find books first, mayn't we? 'Cause we couldn't sleep again now.'

'Very well,' agreed Mary, feeling that it would be better to let them have something to keep them good and quiet. 'Your books are all on the table in the sitting-room, and mind and put on your dressing-gowns and slippers first.' And Mary, who was not suitably attired to appear and find the books herself, quickly went back to her own room.

The twins obediently put on their dressing-gowns and slippers and went through the connecting door into the sitting-room. But they did not take one of their own books which had come with them. They had noticed a cupboard the day before with a lot of old books on the bottom shelf, and they thought it would be much more interesting to look for something there. So they knelt on the floor and pulled out book after book; but they all looked very old and dull, and certainly not at all the sort of books to amuse little girls. For, as a matter of fact, they had been banished to this upstairs room, which was hardly ever used, a long, long time before, just because they were so old and dull that no one wanted them downstairs. However, the twins were of a persevering nature, and they examined them all one by one in the hope of finding something better at last. And as it happened they were rewarded. For at the very bottom of the pile they came upon a book, also very old, but not at all dull, for it was called 'The Demesne of Andesley', and though the twins did not quite know what 'demesne' meant, there was a picture at the beginning of Andesley Hall looking just the same as it did now. The book had probably been carried up among the rest by mistake.

'We'll look at this one! It's all about here!' cried Celia triumphantly; and then they bundled all the others back into the cupboard as quickly as they could, and

carefully carrying off the chosen book they both got into one bed to look at it together.

But it proved to be very difficult reading indeed, with its old-fashioned print and s's that looked like f's, and its long words. And to the twins' disappointment there were no more pictures. They turned over the pages and read a little here and there, very slowly, and had to skip a great many unfamiliar words. They realized from some of the names they found that the stories Great-Aunt Susan had told them last evening were all in this book, but even so they could not follow them very well.

'It's *too* difficult!' said Celia at last, sinking suddenly down in the bed with a big yawn.

But Delia, turning over several pages at once, came upon a name which made her cry out:

'Wizen Wood! Celia! Here's something about Wizen Wood!'

Celia popped up again, all attention at once, and they both bent their heads together over the page, and read aloud slowly:

' "Wizen Wood, which lies at ſome little diſtance from the Hall, was ſaid in olden days to have ſome magic or enchantment within its bounds,——"

'It has too! it has!' exclaimed the twins excitedly; and then they read on:

' "——as indeed the name ſhews; for Wizen Wood is but a corruption of Wiſhing Wood."' The twins were rather bothered by 'corruption', but the meaning was clear to them.

'*Wishing Wood!*' cried Delia. 'That's what Wizen Wood means really!'

'We *thought* it was a queer name, didn't we!' cried Celia.

' "The story runs that whoſoever ſhall fall aſleep within the wood, after firſt wiſhing a wiſh, will, on awaking, find that his wiſh has been granted to him,——"

'We did! we did!' exclaimed the twins.

' "——though only for ſo long as the moon of that date ſhall run her courſe; for as the old moon diſappears, ſo will the effect of the wiſh diſappear alſo and be forgotten as if it had never been."'

'How funny, Delia! That's what you said last night!' cried Celia.

' " Or if the wiſher ſhall wiſh a ſecond wiſh after he has been granted the firſt, then, alſo, the effect of the firſt wiſh will diſappear and he ſhall have nothing."'

'It doesn't say anything about the touch of water!' said Celia.

'They didn't wash so much in old days,' observed Delia wisely. 'I s'pose that's why there was more magic about then.'

' "But ſince the author has ſlept many times within the wood and wiſhed many a wiſh vainly and without reſult, therefore he deems this is all but an idle tale."'

The twins came to an end and drew deep breaths of satisfaction.

'But it *isn't* an idle tale!' said Celia solemnly.

'It *isn't*!' echoed Delia. 'The author couldn't have found the right magic place.'

'Just fancy!' said Celia, 'we found it out for ourselves!'

'P'raps nobody else in the whole world knows!' said Delia.

'How lovely!' sighed Celia. 'Oh, Delia! this is the gloriousest secret we've ever had!'

'Much the gloriousest!' said Delia blissfully. Then, after a moment's pause for reflection, she added a little doubtfully: 'You don't think we ought to tell Great-Uncle James about it? Because Great-Aunt Susan said the wood belonged to him?'

'No, I don't!' replied Celia very decidedly. 'Great-Uncle James doesn't look as if he would like magic a bit.'

'No, he doesn't,' agreed Delia eagerly. 'And he might say we weren't to go back to the wood again ever!'

'Sure to,' said Celia, ''cause he stops such a lot of nice things.'

And they both nodded their heads together wisely as they thought of the sliding down the banisters and rolling down the bank and playing ball on the drive.

'No! no!' added Celia. 'That's why we mustn't tell anybody about skippiting.'

'But, of course,' said Delia thoughtfully, 'it would be lovely to let other people have wishes too.'

'Yes, *wouldn't* it!' exclaimed Celia.

'P'raps,' went on Delia, 'we could *take* somebody to the magic place without telling them, you know.'

'Yes! yes!' cried Celia, 'and just ask them what they would wish for if they could have a wish!'

'Yes, and then p'raps they would fall asleep not knowing, as we did!' cried Delia. 'And then wake up and find it had come true!'

'But *we* should know all the time!' said Celia, bouncing up and down in the bed. 'Oh, what fun it would be!'

'And it would be *kind* fun too,' said Delia with satisfaction at the thought.

'But what person could we take?' Celia wondered.

They were still considering this difficult problem when Mary came in to tell them it was time to get up.

The time had flown by so quickly that the twins were quite taken by surprise.

'Oh!—is it still raining?' asked Celia quickly, while Delia swiftly pushed the old book under the bed-clothes.

Mary said it was, and they had better put on their woollen jerseys, but she wouldn't wonder if it cleared up soon; and she left the room without suspecting that there was a secret in the air.

The moment she had gone the twins slipped out of bed

and into the sitting-room, where they hid the old book away under the others again, and shut the cupboard door tightly.

'It would never do to let anyone else see it!' they murmured together.

They dressed quickly, and then, leaving the door open between the two rooms, had a lovely time skippiting backwards and forwards from the farther wall of one to the farther wall of the other, just stopping themselves with their hands, pushing off again, and turning round all in one movement.

'Oh, bother!' they both cried when the gong sounded in Parker's best manner. They seemed quite ready for breakfast, however, by the time they were seated at the table, which was not surprising as they had started the morning so early.

Great-Aunt Susan smiled at them approvingly, thinking how neat and nice they looked with their well-brushed hair and their little white woollen jumpers pulled on over their linen frocks.

'They have come straight downstairs as good as gold this morning,' she said to herself complacently. 'I feel sure everything will go smoothly now, and we shall have no more *unusual* happenings.'

She little knew how very much mistaken she was!

Great-Uncle James was taking a gloomy view of the weather and everything else this morning.

'This damp has started my lumbago off again,' he told Great-Aunt Susan in an injured tone.

'Oh dear! How unfortunate!' said Great-Aunt Susan sympathetically.

The twins looked up with sudden interest.

'Ah! it's a good thing to be young!' remarked Great-Uncle James, meeting Celia's attentive gaze. '*You* don't know what lumbago means, eh?'

'Oh yes, we do!' replied Celia eagerly. 'We know all about it.'

'Know all about it, hey? Suffer much from it yourselves?' he asked sarcastically.

'No, but Daddy has it sometimes,' replied Celia with dignity.

'*We've* had chicken-pox and measles,' said Delia, also with dignity.

'That's quite enough for little girls of eight to have had, isn't it?' said Great-Aunt Susan, feeling that a little peace-making was needed.

'Eight and three-quarters,' murmured Celia, still rather on her dignity.

'It's a great pity about the rain,' Great-Aunt Susan went on, by way of changing the subject. 'But I think very likely it will clear up presently. "Rain before seven, fine by eleven," you know!'

'Yes, and it *was* rain before seven; we saw it,' said Celia, with a little smile at Delia because of the other thing they had seen that morning.

'Yes, we did,' said Delia with an answering smile.

After breakfast Great-Aunt Susan left the twins to amuse themselves in the drawing-room while she paid her daily visit to the cook and then went to her own sitting-room to write letters.

'Would you like some books to look at, dear children?' she asked them first.

'No, thank you, Great-Aunt Susan,' they replied politely but firmly, for they felt they had done enough reading for one day.

'May we just look at all the things, please?' asked Celia.

'Of course you may, dears,' said Great-Aunt Susan. 'You may look round as much as you like, but you won't touch anything, will you? for so many of the things in the room are very old and valuable.'

The twins promised not to touch; and then they started to make a careful tour of the room, looking at everything in its proper turn. They spent a long time in front of the cupboards with glass doors, and shelves crowded with beautiful china of all colours, plates and cups and saucers of wonderful patterns, and dainty little figures of people and quaint animals, and many interesting odds and ends. Another thing almost as absorbing was a round, glass-topped table containing all sorts of treasures in silver; among them a baby's coral-and-bells, rather battered-looking, as if it had been banged about by many babies a very, very long time ago. And then they turned to the long wall facing the windows and gazed at the row of portraits of ladies, with long ringlets or with powdered hair dressed high on their heads, and men who had long hair too or wore wigs—all in such beautiful clothes.

'I wonder if any of them ever wished a wish in Wizen Wood?' whispered Delia.

'Yes, I wonder!' whispered back Celia, looking at them with fresh interest.

And presently Delia whispered again:

'Do you think it's just because everything here is so old and different somehow that that's why there's still some magic about the place?'

And Celia nodded like a Chinese mandarin.

There were many other things to look at, so many indeed that it was quite a surprise to the twins when Great-Aunt Susan came smilingly into the room to say what good children they had been, and wouldn't they like to go out now, as it was eleven o'clock and the rain had stopped and the sun was coming out.

The twins needed no second invitation. They rushed upstairs for their thicker shoes, and two minutes later went careering out of the front door.

'Keep to the paths, dear children! Don't go on to the

grass yet!' Great-Aunt Susan called after them from the window of her little sitting-room.

'Yes, we will! No, we won't!' they called back gaily in reply to both injunctions.

'That's the best part of skippiting,' said Celia in a low voice; 'it doesn't matter *where* we do it.'

'No, it's always lovely!' said Delia softly, prancing with joy at the thought of the pleasure to come.

'I think the best place would be down the drive,' went on Celia, ''cause if we went by the garden paths we might meet Saunders.'

Delia agreed at once that to meet Saunders would be most undesirable. So they ran a little way until they were well hidden from the house or gardens by the tall bushes and shrubs growing on either side; and then off they went, skippiting merrily down the long, winding drive; on and on and on, their little, thin legs twinkling along, their fair hair blowing back from their foreheads, and their faces shining with delight. It was the longest skippiting they had done without stopping, because the drive was over a mile long; but at last they had to bring their feet firmly down to earth once more, for the tall gates and the lodge-keeper's cottage came in sight.

They just walked on almost to the gates because they always liked to see all there was to be seen, and when they had driven through them the first evening there was not much time to inspect anything.

They were handsome iron gates, but the stone gate-posts were something of a disappointment to the twins, being square and flat at the top, with no interesting heraldic animals seated upon them. The twins had once seen some gates presided over by stone griffins, one on each gate-post, glaring fiercely at each other, and they had admired them greatly.

A smiling woman came out of the lodge.

'Good morning, missies,' she said. 'Did you want to go outside?'

'No, thank you, not just now,' said the twins a little grandly, as if they were quite used to taking walks along the high road together; but they smiled back in a friendly way.

'Ye're the mistress's little great-nieces Saunders was telling me about?' said the woman.

'Yes,' replied the twins, wondering if it was the damage to the grass bank of which she had heard.

'Are you Mrs. Saunders?' inquired Celia gravely.

'Yes, I'm Mrs. Saunders,' replied the woman, and she sounded quite pleased about it too.

There seemed nothing more to be said at the moment, so the twins, who did not believe in making conversation unnecessarily, bade Mrs. Saunders good-bye and turned back up the drive again. They walked a discreet distance, and then off they went, skippiting all the long way back again. When they reached the path to the bowling-green they just took a peep to see how the grass looked. And, thanks to the rain, it was all as green and smooth as possible, so they felt very glad about that.

They spent all the rest of the morning blissfully skippiting up and down the drive. Anyone who has just learnt to swim, or to skate, or to ride a bicycle, knows what a joy it is to practise the new and exciting way of getting along; and the twins, who had not yet learnt any of these things, had suddenly acquired this still more thrilling accomplishment, so no wonder they felt as if they never wanted to stop!

'If we had *known* it was a Wishing Wood, and had thought ever so long about what we would wish for, I don't believe we could ever have thought about anything so lovely as this!' said Celia, drawing a deep breath, as they came to a pause within sight of the gates once more.

And Delia earnestly agreed with her.

Presently, as they neared the house, Great-Aunt Susan came down the drive to meet them.

'Well, dears,' she said, 'how have you managed to amuse yourselves this morning?'

'We've just been up and down the drive,' answered Delia demurely.

'There's good children!' approved Great-Aunt Susan. 'You couldn't have kept to a drier place. But I hope you didn't find it dull?'

'Oh, *no*, Great-Aunt Susan!' said both twins together.

CHAPTER VI

MURIEL MELLON'S WISH

BUT though the twins were so happy over the result of the wish they had wished for themselves, they did not forget their idea of perhaps being able to give some one else the chance to wish a wish too.

The sun continued to shine steadily, drying up the ground so completely that by the afternoon Great-Aunt Susan pronounced it to be quite safe to go on the grass once more. The twins heard this with great satisfaction, and presently they slipped off together for the whole afternoon, only reappearing at tea-time.

'Well, dear children, and where have you been all this afternoon?' asked Great-Aunt Susan, when they were all sitting round the tea-table once more.

'We went to Wizen Wood again,' replied Celia.

'Why, you seem to have taken a great fancy to Wizen Wood!' said Great-Aunt Susan with a kindly smile.

'Yes, we like it very much,' said Celia, trying to sound quite unconcerned, while Delia went on eating bread and butter, trying to *look* quite unconcerned.

'Well, be sure you don't walk too far and overtire yourselves, my dears,' said Great-Aunt Susan, only noticing Delia's silence to wonder if it came from fatigue. 'If you want to play in the Wood, Bolton could take you round there in the car sometimes.'

Both children looked up now in surprise.

'Could the car go to Wizen Wood?' asked Celia.

'Oh yes, quite easily!' said their great-aunt. 'There is a little lane that runs along the far side of the wood and down on to the high road.'

'Abominably rough surface!' growled Great-Uncle

James, who still felt twinges of lumbago from time to time.

'It isn't very smooth, to be sure,' said Great-Aunt Susan gently, 'but it is quite possible for the car. Bolton would go slowly; he is such a *very* careful driver.'

'He'd better be!' observed Great-Uncle James gruffly. '*I* never intend to be rushed about the countryside to the danger of my own life and other people's!' And he bit fiercely into a piece of plum-cake, which prevented his saying any more at the moment about what he thought of motorists who behaved in such a manner.

'I really think I must drive to the wood with you one day,' said Great-Aunt Susan, speaking to the twins and not to Great-Uncle James. 'It is so long since I have been there.'

'Oh, that would be lovely!' said both children so earnestly that Great-Aunt Susan felt much flattered.

The truth was that the twins had spent the afternoon skippiting off to Wizen Wood, provided with a bundle of bits of string which they had begged from Parker; and, having found the secret dell again, after a good deal of hunting about, they had spent their time tying back the most troublesome and prickly branches to make a way for a grown-up person to pass through without being too much touzled or torn, which things grown-up people always disliked so much. And after they had worked for a long time, and really made quite a good passage through from the path, they had sat down to rest and discuss how in the world they could manage to get a grown-up person to come there with them. And they had not been able to think of any good plan at all. Of course they might ask if Mary could go out for a walk with them one day. But on the other hand that might make Great-Aunt Susan think it would be a good plan to send them for a walk with Mary *every* day, and that was not at all what they wanted. So when Great-Aunt Susan mentioned the lane,

and then suggested coming to the wood herself, they felt highly delighted.

'We might have a picnic there one day, perhaps,' went on Great-Aunt Susan. At which the twins were more delighted than ever.

But when the afternoon post was brought in they were most delighted of all. For Great-Aunt Susan opened a note, and after reading it said:

'Now isn't that nice! You will have a little playfellow here to-morrow! Little Muriel Mellon is coming to spend the whole day.'

The twins scarcely heard Great-Aunt Susan's explanation of how she had thought they might be dull with only elderly people at Andesley Hall, and so she had asked Mrs. Mellon which day she could come and bring her little girl, and how Mrs. Mellon was going away but would send Muriel over in the car by herself. For the moment they heard that another child was coming the same thought flashed into both their minds: 'We'll take *her* to Wizen Wood!'

'How old is she, please?' asked Celia eagerly.

'Just about your own age, I should say,' replied Great-Aunt Susan, much pleased by the joyful faces with which the twins had greeted her piece of news. 'I have only seen her once or twice and so I don't know exactly. In fact I hardly know her at all—the Mellons spend so much of their time in London—but she seems to be a nice, quiet child.'

'That's a good thing! That's the sort of child I like to see!' said Great-Uncle James grimly, with a searching glance first at one twin and then at the other to see if they were taking this remark to heart.

'Well, *I* think we have seen two nice, quiet children to-day,' said Great-Aunt Susan, patting a shoulder of each twin with either hand.

But the twins themselves were more interested to hear that their expected guest was about their own age than in the subject of goodness and quietness. And from after tea till bedtime all their conversation, when they were alone, was about Muriel and whether they should let her into their secret straight away and show her their wonderful skippiting, or whether they should just take her to the secret dell first without telling her anything, and then make her repeat their own words and see how surprised she would be afterwards. But they were both quite decided on one point, and that was that, if Muriel was able to wish a wish too, she must wish the same as theirs and be able to go skippiting with them for the rest of the day.

'I wish she'd got a nicer name,' remarked Delia pensively after they were in bed. 'Muriel Mellon sounds—well, you know how it sounds!'

'But she can't help her name,' protested Celia. 'P'raps she isn't a bit like it sounds like.'

The twins were on the doorstep next morning, waiting anxiously for their guest, when the big saloon car came sailing up the drive. There was no unseemly sounding of the horn to herald the approach of this visitor. A very stiff-looking chauffeur was at the wheel, and Muriel Mellon sat in solitary grandeur in the back seat.

The first glance at her sent the twins' hopes down considerably, and when the chauffeur opened the door and she stepped primly out their faces fell too. She looked a regular Muriel Mellon! Her cheeks were plump and pasty-looking, her eyes were grey-green and rather small, her nose was puddingy, and her hair, which straggled down to her waist, was thin and lank. She was considerably taller, and evidently older, than the twins.

'How do you do? How very alike you are!' she said condescendingly to the twins as she shook hands with them.

The twins murmured an answering 'How do you do?' and then gazed at her in disappointed silence.

Great-Aunt Susan came out to greet Muriel, and then, noticing the constrained air about the twins, which she put down to sudden shyness, she told them to take their guest upstairs to leave her things.

'And then I am sure you will all like to go out of doors and amuse yourselves together,' she added kindly. 'It is only just eleven o'clock, so there is most of the morning before you still.'

'What are your names?' asked Muriel as they mounted the stairs together.

The twins told her.

'And how old are you?'

'We're eight and three-quarters,' replied Celia solemnly.

'Oh! I'm ten and a half,' Muriel informed them in a superior tone.

'Yes, you look ten and a half,' said Celia, who did not mean to be sat upon.

After that they continued on their way in silence.

'Is this your room?' asked Muriel as they reached the bedroom. Then, without waiting for an answer, she went on: 'My room at home has just been done up. It has pink curtains and a pink dressing-table cover and a pink counterpane. Pink is my colour. Which is your colour?'

The twins looked at each other, determined not to be stumped for an answer.

'Blue,' they replied boldly, that being the colour of the smocks they were wearing.

'I don't think blue is really your colour,' returned Muriel, looking at them critically. 'Of course you have fair hair, but then you haven't got blue eyes, and people who wear blue ought to have blue eyes.'

The twins opened their brown eyes wide.

'If people ought to wear the same colour as their eyes,'

observed Delia thoughtfully, 'you oughtn't to wear pink; you ought to wear green.'

'Don't be silly! and my eyes aren't green,' replied Muriel rather crossly. She took off her coat and hat and appeared in a pink shantung silk frock with white collar and cuffs. Then, loosening the string of the pink linen bag she had carried on her arm, she brought out a brush and comb and proceeded to arrange her hair. 'You've got short hair still,' she remarked. 'I'm glad mine is long. Long hair is getting much more fashionable now.'

'We're glad ours is short,' said Celia stoutly; 'it's much more comf'table.'

'We don't want to be fash'nable a bit,' said Delia.

'You will when you're older,' said Muriel loftily. 'And anyway, I expect if yours *was* long it wouldn't be as long as mine. Mine *is* nice and long, isn't it?'

'Yes, it is long,' replied the twins, refusing to add the 'nice' as, privately, they thought it was hideous.

Muriel looked at herself in the glass, and for the first time a shade of dissatisfaction passed over her face.

'I wish Mother would take me to have my hair "permed",' she said rather peevishly. 'But she never will. Have you ever had your hair "permed"?'

This was quite beyond the twins, and they stared at the questioner.

'Permanently waved, at the hairdresser's, you know,' said Muriel, explaining pityingly. 'My mother has hers done. Doesn't yours?'

'No, she doesn't,' said Celia.

'Mummy's hair is lovely and wavy of itself, not a bit like yours,' said Delia with more truth than politeness.

'I shall have mine permanently waved when I'm grown up, and then no one will know the difference,' observed Muriel grandly as she clasped on her slide and stood with her head rather on one side to judge of the effect.

'Let's go out now,' said Celia abruptly.

The twins had, of course, both been thinking the same thing. Muriel was not at all the right sort of person to take to Wizen Wood. But then, what else could they do with her? They couldn't possibly let her go on talking like this all day long! No, they must just take her there as they had originally planned, and only hope that the magic might improve her.

'Shall we take hats?' asked Delia.

Celia nodded. ''Cause it may be hot crossing the fields.'

'I *always* wear a hat out-of-doors,' remarked Muriel, 'to keep my complexion from getting all sunburnt.'

To which the twins could find no fitting reply.

As they all three started down the gravel path together Great-Aunt Susan watched them go from her sitting-room window.

'The Mellon child *is* rather older, after all,' she said to herself as she noticed the difference in heights. 'But then that is all the better, as she will probably have a sobering influence on the dear little twins. I am sure they will all be very happy together, and I shall just leave them to play by themselves all the time. That is what children like best.' And the kind-hearted old lady tied on her hat and went out into the garden to look at her flowers.

Muriel certainly did have a sobering influence on the twins, but not quite such an improving one as Great-Aunt Susan expected. In fact, as they passed the farmyard and saw the door of a hen-house standing ajar a dreadful thought entered Celia's mind. How lovely to shut Muriel up inside, turn the catch, and then go skippiting off all morning alone with Delia! Drawing Delia aside, and pretending to look into the hen-house to see if there were any eggs, she whispered this plan into her ear.

Delia's face lit up for a moment, but then she shook her head.

'It's a *lovely* idea; but we're supposed to be polite to guests,' she murmured disappointedly.

'Oh, bother! so we are!' said Celia.

'Besides, what would Great-Aunt Susan say?' suggested Delia.

Celia nodded. '*Or* Great-Uncle James!' she added wisely.

Sadly giving up such an excellent plan, they rejoined Muriel and walked away from temptation.

'I don't like farmyards; they're always so horrid and messy!' said Muriel affectedly; and the twins couldn't help thinking that a morning in the hen-house would have done her a world of good.

They told Muriel that they were taking her to the wood where they had a nice surprise for her; and then firmly refused to explain any further, in spite of all her teasing questions.

By the time they reached the big field with the haystack Muriel was complaining of feeling hot.

'It's lovely and cool in the wood,' said Celia encouragingly.

'But it's such a long way away!' grumbled Muriel.

'Not really *very* long,' said Delia. 'And there is a much easier way to come back. Isn't there, Celia?'

'*Much* easier!' said Celia, with a little skip of joy.

'Then why didn't you take me by that way?' asked Muriel indignantly.

'We couldn't,' said Celia with a chuckle.

'Why not?' demanded Muriel crossly.

'It's a secret,' said Delia.

'How silly you are with your secrets!' grumbled Muriel. 'I don't want to go to the stupid wood. I think I shall just go back again!'

'Oh, no! no!' protested both twins together.

'Do come on!' said Celia. 'It's almost as short to go on now as to go back.'

'But then there'll be all the going back afterwards,' objected Muriel.

'But that will be quite, quite easy!' exclaimed Delia.

'Do come on!' said Celia again. 'It's really a lovely secret. Something you'll like ever so much!'

Muriel began to feel really curious about this secret, so she went on.

When they arrived at the haystack they all sat down to rest for a little. The twins were quite glad to rest too, as they did not dare to go skippiting in front of Muriel yet in case when they got her to the secret dell the magic should not work for her, and then she would have learnt their secret for nothing and would probably give it away to everybody. However, they were too impatient for the experiment to wait long, and soon both jumped up again.

'I'm not going to move for ages yet!' said Muriel crossly.

The twins looked at her consideringly.

'There may be nasty biting insects in the hay,' said Celia.

'And sometimes there's rats,' said Delia seriously.

In another moment Muriel was on her feet too and hurrying away from the haystack.

'I'm very tired!' she complained presently in a peevish tone, dragging her feet along the ground as they climbed up the slope towards the wood. 'You ought not to have brought me such a long way!'

'It's getting very near now,' said Celia encouragingly. 'We thought it a long way the first time we came, didn't we, Delia?'

'Yes, we did,' said Delia. 'And then yesterday it seemed as quick as quick, didn't it?'

And the twins smiled at each other in a manner that Muriel found most irritating.

'You're getting out of breath yourselves!' she snapped.

'Yes, but we won't be *afterwards*,' said Celia.

'Not after you know the secret,' said Delia.

'I don't believe it's a proper secret at all!' exclaimed Muriel crossly. But she kept on all the same.

They reached the wood at last, and even Muriel felt calmed down when they went into its cool greenness.

'Isn't it *lovely* here?' asked Celia, almost in a whisper.

'It's better here than out in those horrid fields, anyway,' was all Muriel would say. But she did not grumble any more as they walked on by the winding path through the wonderful wood.

The twins went ahead now, pressing eagerly on, filled with excitement at the thought of what might happen in the secret dell; and Muriel followed closely behind, looking as if she had actually caught a little of the excitement too. When they reached the tall tree up which they had seen the squirrel run the twins stopped and turned to Muriel.

'We are just coming to the secret place!' said Celia in a solemn whisper. 'Now, when we get there, will you *promise* to say just what we tell you to?'

'All right, I promise,' said Muriel, her curiosity thoroughly aroused by the twins' sparkling eyes and mysterious air.

So they turned aside from the path and went slipping through between the trees and bushes. The twins' work of the day before had been well done; and Muriel soon found herself standing beside them, looking down on the beautiful little dell.

'The secret is just going to happen!' whispered Celia, almost trembling with excitement. 'You must lie down there, and then we will tell you the words to say.'

But Muriel was of a contradictory nature, and, besides,

she had just remembered that the twins were younger than she was.

'Why should I?' she asked provokingly.

The twins felt nearly distracted at this sudden hitch. Surely they hadn't brought this tiresome girl all the way only to have everything spoilt at the last moment!

'It's the secret!' said Delia, almost wringing her hands. 'It's the lovely, glorious *secret*!'

'Oh, *do* do it, and then you will see!' begged Celia.

Impressed in spite of herself, Muriel stepped down into the dell.

'What do you want me to say?' she asked.

'Just lie down where you are!' said Celia eagerly; 'yes, that's the way! And then say: "I wish I could go along by a nicer, quicker way than just walking."'

'Do you mean this is a sort of wishing place?' demanded Muriel, suddenly sitting up again. 'I don't believe in nonsense like that!' But in spite of her disbelieving words her eyes began to glisten.

'Oh, just try it! just try it!' begged the twins; and their excited faces convinced Muriel, who laid her head down again on the wild thyme.

' "I wish I could go along by a nicer, quicker way than just walking",' prompted the twins together.

And the wood-pigeons in the tops of the trees called to one another: Croooo croooo croooo, croo croo: croooo croooo croooo, croo croo: croooo croooo croooo, croo croo.

And then Muriel spoke.

'I wish to be the prettiest girl for miles around.'

Words failed the twins at this unexpected treachery, and Muriel fell asleep.

"I DON'T BELIEVE IN NONSENSE!"

CHAPTER VII

MURIEL'S MISFORTUNE

THE twins stood staring down upon the sleeping Muriel with a curious mixture of disappointment and expectation. Would anything come of such a stupid and worthless wish? They saw her hand go up slowly, waveringly, still in her sleep. The hand caught the spray of blue flowers dangling overhead and bent it down so that the flowers just brushed that plain, plump face. And then Muriel woke and sat up.

The twins stared harder than ever. They rubbed their eyes and then stared again.

'*Am* I very pretty?' demanded Muriel excitedly.

'Yes,' said the twins bluntly.

Because she was.

Her pasty cheeks had become pink; her puddingy nose had grown more shapely; her greenish eyes looked larger and almost blue; and her straight, limp hair was now waving becomingly about her shoulders. There was never such an extraordinary change seen in any little girl before. She rose to her feet with an air of triumph.

'There!' she said, with the utmost self-satisfaction.

The twins looked at her severely.

'You broke your promise,' said Celia.

'You promised to say the words we told you,' said Delia.

Muriel gave a little affected laugh.

'It was such rubbish that you said. I don't even remember what it was. Anyway, this is *much* better!' And she preened her head from side to side and stroked her waving hair.

'It isn't *nearly* so good,' said Celia. 'The other was a simply lovely surprise, and now you won't *ever* know about it.'

'No, you won't!' said Delia firmly.

At least, they determined, they would keep the secret of skippiting safe from this untrustworthy girl.

'I don't care,' said Muriel jauntily. And then she asked with sudden curiosity: 'Who told you about this place?'

'Nobody told us,' said Celia; 'we found it out for ourselves.'

'Nobody knows except us,' said Delia. 'It's our secret.'

'We've been *trusting* you not to tell anybody,' said Celia solemnly.

'All right, I won't. I really promise this time,' said Muriel promptly. And she meant what she said; for her vanity told her it was better to pretend that her prettiness came naturally, instead of merely being the result of a wish. 'But how does it happen?' she asked.

'What did you dream?' asked Celia cautiously.

Muriel looked rather puzzled.

'I can't quite remember it now,' she said, 'but I know something told me I should be very pretty; and you see I am!' she added with a little toss of her head.

The twins looked at each other. If that was all Muriel remembered they would not explain any further. So they only nodded their heads wisely.

'It's the dream that does it,' observed Delia.

'Shall we go back to the house now?' asked Muriel eagerly. For her one desire was to reach a looking-glass and see for herself how pretty she was.

'You'll have to walk back all the same way you came now,' said Celia.

'Why? You said there was a shorter way back!' said Muriel indignantly.

'You've spoilt all that by wishing the wrong wish,' said Delia sternly.

Muriel grumbled and complained in vain. The twins

remembered quite well that the car could be brought up to the wood to take her back, and it would have been easy for one of them to go skippiting back to ask for it. But they considered that to be made to walk all the way was only what she deserved.

'You'd better sit down and rest a little more first,' said Celia, so firmly that Muriel actually obeyed. Her attention was once more taken up by the waving hair, which she began arranging over her shoulders, and Celia, who had had an idea, pulled Delia aside.

'Let's divide!' she whispered. 'You go skippiting as far as the haystack, and wait for us behind it. And then we'll exchange without her seeing, and I'll wait and come skippiting afterwards. She won't know it isn't me all the time!'

Delia quickly saw the point of halving their walk like this.

'I'll say I must hurry back as I have a letter to write to Switzerland,' she whispered. 'That's what grown-ups always say; and you know we really will have to write a letter again soon, though p'raps not to-day,' she added truthfully.

So Delia made her excuse in her best grown-up manner, explaining that she would go much more quickly than Muriel wanted to; and then she slipped away through the bushes and went skippiting gaily off; while Celia sat down and persuaded Muriel to rest a little longer.

Muriel was a selfish child without much imagination; and she was so much taken up with the idea of her newly gained good looks that she hardly seemed to think twice about the wonder and surprise of it all; and she never even troubled to ask the meaning of the words the twins had wanted her to say. Celia was glad of this, but at the same time she grew very tired of telling Muriel how pretty she was, which was the only form of conversation Muriel

took any interest in at the moment. However, she put up with it long enough to give Delia time to gain the haystack, and then she started off on the first half of the return journey with this tiresome guest.

Muriel's prettiness did not help her much now, and she complained all the time as she trudged along across the open fields, where the mid-day sun shone hotter than ever. Celia was feeling pretty hot too, but consoled herself with the thought of the nice rest she would have on the hay, and then the skippiting easily home from there. Poor Delia would have the walk uphill, she thought. But then she would have had a good rest first. And she hadn't had to sit and talk to Muriel all alone either. Celia came to the conclusion that this made things quite fair.

When they approached the haystack Celia spoke rather loud.

'Just walk on very quickly, Muriel. I thought I saw something funny move behind the stack. P'raps it's a rat! I'll go round and see.'

'Don't be so silly! Don't disturb it!' squeaked Muriel, scuttling on ahead.

But Celia disappeared round the haystack.

'No, there wasn't any rat there,' said Delia appearing round the other side, and continuing the conversation calmly.

'It would just have served you right if there had been, and it had bitten you!' snapped Muriel.

So they walked on together, Muriel very hot and tired and cross, and Delia very composed and cool; while Celia sank down happily on to a heap of hay and enjoyed a well-earned rest.

After some little time had passed Celia sat up suddenly.

'Ooh!' she said to herself, 'what will Great-Aunt Susan say when she sees Muriel?'

Roused by this thought, she jumped up quickly and

started off on her skippiting homeward; and she had rested so long that she saw no sign of Delia and Muriel anywhere ahead of her; but when she reached the house and stole quietly in there were their voices talking to Great-Aunt Susan on the landing. She slipped hastily through the swing-door to the servants' quarters and up the back stairs, along the passage, and up the stairs to their rooms. And when Delia and Muriel came into the bedroom, there, through the open door, Celia could be seen at the sitting-room table writing industriously.

It was true she hadn't got further than 'Dear Daddy and Mummy,' but Muriel couldn't know that.

Delia stood and stared in such astonishment to see her twin back already that Celia nearly giggled aloud. They had plenty of time for whispered explanations, however, while Muriel, all her tiredness forgotten, stood in front of the looking-glass in raptures over her appearance.

'And what about Great-Aunt Susan?' asked Celia, suddenly remembering what had sent her skippiting back so quickly. 'Didn't she notice the difference?'

'She didn't *say* anything,' replied Delia. 'I'd thought of that too. But you know she doesn't see very well without her spectacles.'

'She noticed how pretty I was,' boasted Muriel. 'I know she did; she looked at me such a lot!'

'Then I s'pose she hadn't noticed what you were like before,' said Celia with extreme bluntness.

Rather luckily the gong went just at this moment and there was a general scurry to get ready.

At luncheon Muriel sat on Great-Aunt Susan's right hand, so Celia, not altogether to her liking, was moved down beside Great-Uncle James.

'Been a good girl this morning, hey?' he asked her gruffly.

'Yes, I think so,' replied Celia, rather doubtfully. . .

'Glad to hear it! glad to hear it!' said Great-Uncle James unbelievingly.

But Great-Aunt Susan, who had learnt in answer to her questions that Muriel had been taken to Wizen Wood and found the walk very long and tiring, scolded the twins gently for not taking more care of their little guest.

'You must learn to be thoughtful for other people, you know, dear children,' she said.

The twins felt privately that they had been thoughtful for Muriel all in vain. They also felt that she was a mean sneak to complain when after all she had had her wish and was now sitting there looking as pleased with herself as possible. But they kept quiet and listened politely to their great-aunt's remarks.

Great-Aunt Susan had her spectacles on now, and throughout the meal she kept glancing at Muriel. 'What a sweetly pretty child she is!' she thought. 'And I had never realized it before!'

But even Great-Aunt Susan's kindness could not blind her to the fact that Muriel now seemed an exceedingly silly child. She simpered and talked affectedly, till the twins felt perfectly hot and ashamed, and Great-Uncle James looked across at her from under his bushy eyebrows now and again in anything but an admiring way.

In fact everyone, except perhaps Muriel, felt very glad when luncheon came to an end, and even she was not entirely sorry, as she was now able to return upstairs and gaze at herself in the glass. The twins, who had been told by Great-Aunt Susan to fetch their hats and then take their guest quietly into the garden, tried for a long time in vain to get her away from her own reflection.

'I believe you're jealous!' she told them at last.

'We aren't a bit!' said Celia indignantly. 'We wouldn't be as silly as you for anything!'

But Muriel only smiled in an irritating manner and continued to pose before the glass.

Delia had more success in unsettling her composure.

'I believe it'll all go away again when you wash your face,' she said calmly.

Muriel turned to her, looking rather startled.

'What makes you think that?' she asked.

The twins exchanged glances. Evidently Muriel had *not* dreamed such a clear dream as they had. And yet it was only reasonable to suppose that if the touch of water would wash away the magic in one case, then it would in another.

'We're sure it will,' said Celia firmly. 'Shall I fetch my sponge and see?' She darted towards the bathroom, but Muriel called her back in agitated tones. 'Oh, all right,' said Celia, stopping unwillingly, 'but you'll have to wash your face sometime, you know.'

'You wouldn't look very pretty, getting dirtier and dirtier every day,' observed Delia thoughtfully.

'I needn't wash it, so there!' said Muriel, suddenly recovering her spirits. 'I can clean it with face cream. Lots of ladies do that, I know. I've heard them say so!' And she turned back to the glass with a smile of triumph.

'You are jealous, I know you are!' she added jeeringly.

This was too much for the twins' patience. They put their hats firmly on their heads and went to the door.

'Well, *we're* going to the garden,' said Celia. 'Shall we tell Great-Aunt Susan you'd rather stay up here and look at yourself in the glass?'

This had the desired effect.

'Don't be so silly!' said Muriel crossly; and she put on her hat and followed them downstairs with an injured air.

Great-Aunt Susan saw them out at the terrace door.

'Remember, my dears,' she said to the twins, 'you must do what *Muriel* likes this afternoon, not what you like. There's good children!' she added with a kindly wave, to take away from the severity of her words.

But the trouble with Muriel was that she did not seem to care to do anything. They all wandered round the garden together and then sat on a seat in the shade, staring at the roses. But Muriel yawned and looked bored, and so she spoilt the whole garden for the twins too. The fact was that unless she could gaze at herself in the glass, or show herself off to admiring beholders, she felt discontented. And she realized, quite truly, that in the twins she did not have admiring beholders at all.

Meanwhile the twins regretted heartily that they had ever taken Muriel to Wizen Wood; because, bad as she had been before, she was ever so much more stupid and tiresome since she had had her wish.

They tried to suggest various games, but Muriel did not care to play any of them.

'Then what *would* you like to do?' asked Celia, almost at her wits' end.

'I don't know,' replied Muriel fretfully. Then she brightened up a little. 'I might pick some flowers and decorate my hat with them,' she suggested.

The twins looked rather doubtful.

'We haven't ever picked the flowers, except with Great-Aunt Susan,' said Celia honestly.

'Shall we go into the fields and pick daisies and things?' suggested Delia.

But Muriel would have none of that.

'I don't want common *weeds*!' she said scornfully. 'I want garden flowers, of course. Were you ever told *not* to pick them?'

The twins shook their heads.

'Well, then, it's all right! How silly you are!' And

Muriel began to walk along the borders, pulling in a reckless way whatever flowers took her fancy, while the twins followed, unable to stop her, but feeling vexed and uncomfortable.

Suddenly a gate slammed and heavy footsteps were heard behind them. They all turned hastily, and there was Saunders striding towards them, looking very stern. They all stood still, Muriel feeling rather foolish now she was caught picking somebody else's flowers.

Saunders looked from one child to another, and realized that only one of the three had been daring to pick his precious flowers. He addressed himself to Celia, who stood nearest him.

'Did the young lady have permission from the mistress to pick them flowers?' he demanded sternly.

'N-no,' replied Celia slowly.

'I asked them,' put in Muriel rather flurriedly, 'and they didn't say I couldn't.' She tried to smile engagingly at him, feeling that he could not fail to be impressed by her extreme prettiness.

'And who's "them", please?' asked Saunders grimly, not impressed in the least.

Muriel indicated the twins.

'Have ye ever picked the flowers yerselves?' he asked the twins.

'Only with Great-Aunt Susan,' they answered truthfully.

'Did ye tell her to pick the flowers?' he asked again.

The twins met his gaze squarely, but hesitated to give Muriel away.

'We didn't know whether she might or not,' replied Celia at last.

'Well, ye may know another time,' said Saunders bluntly, and he turned a severe glance on Muriel. 'There's no one comes into my garden and picks flowers without

permission,' he told her harshly. 'These other young ladies as stay in the house don't pick them, and what business have you to come doing it, I'd like to know!'

Muriel grew very red and confused and made no reply, and the fierce old gardener strode away to look after his roses.

The twins drew a deep breath of relief.

'What a horrid, rude man!' exclaimed Muriel indignantly, as soon as he was out of hearing. 'How dare he speak to me like that! I shan't stay in the garden another minute!' And she marched out at the nearest gate, which led towards the drive, followed by the twins, who felt quite sorry for her now.

'Where would you like to go?' asked Celia kindly.

'I shall go back to the house!' declared Muriel crossly, and she made towards the front door. But her footsteps rather faltered when Great-Uncle James suddenly appeared in the doorway. She still carried the bunch of flowers in her hand, and she had no wish to be questioned about them again.

'Let's go on towards the farm,' said Celia, promptly grasping the situation, and they skirted off down the path in that direction while Great-Uncle James looked after them grimly.

'Up to some mischief, I'll be bound!' he muttered to himself as he started off for a little constitutional before tea.

The children walked on past the farmyard, where the smiling farmer's wife in a blue sun-bonnet bade them good afternoon, and stared so admiringly at Muriel that the vain little girl cheered up considerably.

'Shan't we stay and look at the baby chickens?' asked Celia longingly. For she and Delia had made friends with the farmer's wife the day before, as they were on their way to the wood.

But Muriel had seen something she thought far better than chickens, the very thing, in fact, that she most wanted; something that would answer the purpose of a looking-glass!

'We'll go and sit by that pond,' she said firmly. 'Then I can trim my hat there and see what it looks like.' Without waiting to hear what the twins thought of this plan, she turned aside on to the grass and hurried towards the pond.

The twins looked at each other. Great-Aunt Susan had told them on their first afternoon not to go near the pond. But then this afternoon she had said they must do what Muriel liked. And there was Muriel most determinedly going to the pond. And there was the pond looking very inviting. The twins followed Muriel.

The pond glinted and gleamed in the sunlight, and Muriel sat herself down by the water's edge in the shade of a tall willow, happy at last. She leant over to have one good look at herself first. Then she took off her hat and began to arrange the flowers all round it, slipping their stalks through the ribbon to make all firm. Meanwhile the twins, seeing Muriel engrossed with this occupation, contentedly lay down on their fronts and gazed through the water at the curious and interesting things to be seen at the bottom of the pond. It was a peaceful, enjoyable time for all.

Presently Muriel finished trimming the hat to her liking; and, placing it on her head, she knelt and peered eagerly into the water at her reflection. Yes, she did look prettier than ever with her flowery hat! She looked as pretty as a picture on a chocolate box! But it was difficult to see the flowers properly above the brim of her hat. She wanted to get the full effect of all the colours. She leaned over still farther—she lost her balance—and, plop! There was an enormous splash, which splashed right over the

startled twins, and Muriel disappeared head first into the pond.

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Luckily the pond was a shallow one, and with the help of the twins, who sprang at once to her aid, Muriel soon scrambled out on to the bank. But, alas! what a Muriel! What a sad, draggled, *plain* Muriel! For the touch of water had washed every scrap of her wished-for prettiness away completely!

The twins were full of sympathy and put their arms round her, thereby getting extremely wet themselves.

'Don't cry! don't cry!' they begged, for Muriel sobbed loudly with fright and discomfort; and Delia added:

'You'll only make yourself wetter!' though really that would have been difficult.

Then they took her hands and hurried her back towards the house, saying all the most consoling things they could think of.

As luck would have it, just as they neared the house, there was Great-Uncle James again, coming back through the stable-yard. And then there *was* a commotion!

Great-Uncle James rushed into the house shouting for Great-Aunt Susan. Great-Aunt Susan came running and wringing her hands over the catastrophe, and calling for Mary. Parker, who had hurried through the swing door, hastily summoned Mary, and the bedraggled, dripping Muriel was led up by the back stairs, to be popped into a hot bath and then into Celia's bed, in a nightdress and dressing-gown of Great-Aunt Susan's, while her own clothes went to the kitchen fire to be dried.

There was no time for any but the most hasty explanations, and by the time Muriel was in bed and the twins in clean, dry frocks, Great-Aunt Susan had retired downstairs to rest her agitated nerves. Mary departed too, carrying off the wet clothes; and the twins crept up to the bed

where Muriel lay. She had stopped crying some time ago, but she still gave a little, injured sniff from time to time, and the twins thought it was because of her lost prettiness.

'We're very, *very* sorry!' they said together. And Celia added, meaning to be kind: 'But we like you much more now you aren't pretty.'

Muriel was so much surprised that she forgot to sniff.

'What do you mean?' she asked rather indignantly.

The twins stared at her in dismay.

'Didn't you know it had gone?' asked Delia.

'What *do* you mean?' said Muriel again. '*What* has gone?'

The twins looked at each other and hesitated. Then Celia went to the looking-glass.

'I'll move it so you can see yourself,' she said gently. She tipped the glass a little, and Muriel sat up in bed and stared at her reflection anxiously.

'I don't know what you mean!' she said at last impatiently. 'I'm just the same as I always was, except that my hair's all wet!'

And then the twins realized what had happened.

The magic had been washed away from Muriel's memory too!

The children had their tea together up in the bedroom, and it was not until Muriel, dressed again in dry clothes, had been driven away in the big saloon car that the twins were summoned into the library to give an account of what had occurred. They stood hand-in-hand in front of Great-Aunt Susan and Great-Uncle James and stumbled rather over their story, as they did not want to tell tales of Muriel. Then Great-Aunt Susan lectured them gently about the naughtiness of going near the pond and not taking proper care of their guest.

'We're very, very sorry, Great-Aunt Susan,' said the twins penitently.

'You didn't push the girl into the pond, hey?' asked Great-Uncle James abruptly.

'Oh, no, Great-Uncle James!' said the twins, opening wide, shocked eyes.

'H'm!' grunted Great-Uncle James, as the forgiven twins scampered off to the garden, '*I'd* have pushed her in if I'd been them!'

CHAPTER VIII

BOLTON'S WISH

THE next few days passed by without a further visit to Wizen Wood. Great-Aunt Susan said no more about the picnic she had suggested, and the twins, thinking perhaps it was because of that unlucky day with Muriel Mellon, did not like to remind her about it.

They amused themselves happily enough about the gardens and grounds. Sometimes they would stand in the stable-yard watching Bolton wash the car: sometimes they would help Great-Aunt Susan to pick flowers in one garden: sometimes they would pick raspberries for themselves in the other: sometimes they would pay long visits to the farm to see the creatures and chat with the farmer's wife. And always, when they were alone, they could do their wonderful skippiting.

Great-Aunt Susan began to be able to distinguish Celia from Delia, apart from meal times.

'Dear little Celia is rather the more reckless of the two,' she observed to Great-Uncle James one day, 'and dear little Delia the more thoughtful.'

Great-Uncle James remarked gruffly that he believed them to be both equally reckless and thoughtless; but perhaps that was because that morning they had collided with him rather hard and quite by mistake as they raced round a sudden corner.

One afternoon the whole party went for a little drive in the car; Great-Aunt Susan and Great-Uncle James in the back seat, and the twins sitting demurely beside Bolton in front. They did not venture to ask to sound the horn on this occasion, not even when it was necessary. The car went along very slowly and soberly and, to tell the truth,

the twins found the drive very dull. Skippiting would have been *much* more fun.

'Bolton,' said Delia thoughtfully, after they had gone some miles, 'how do you spell your name, please?'

'B-O-L-T-O-N.' Bolton obligingly spelt it for her.

'I thought it was that,' continued Delia, after repeating the letters slowly. 'But you don't do like your name, do you?'

Bolton was rather mystified.

'What's that, missy?' he asked.

'Well,' said Delia seriously, ' "bolt on" sounds rather fast, and you go so slowly, you know.'

Bolton gave a sudden chuckle.

'That's a good one, missy!' he said. 'Now, I never thought of that before! "Bolt on" to be sure!' And he was so much tickled by this play upon his name that he kept repeating it to himself, always with a pleased chuckle.

'But why *do* you drive so very slow?' asked Celia. 'Won't the car go any faster?'

Bolton was roused by this reflection on his beloved car.

'Won't she go faster, indeed!' he exclaimed. 'She'd go like a greyhound; she'd go like an express train, she would, if only she had the chance. She's a lovely fast car, for all she's rather old!' Then he lowered his voice cautiously: 'The master and mistress they like going dead slow. Why, it'd be as much as my place was worth to go above twenty miles an hour, and mostly it's about fifteen we're doing. It fair goes to my heart sometimes, and the car could do an easy sixty, that she could!'

'What a pity!' said the twins together, feeling quite sorry for poor Bolton, and also thinking it would be much more amusing if only they could go rushing along the high road at sixty miles an hour.

Bolton, however, thinking perhaps he had said too

much, hastily changed the subject, and pointed out an object of interest in the landscape.

The next day, after breakfast, Great-Aunt Susan *did* mention the picnic again.

'You have been such good children lately,' she said kindly, 'I think you ought to have a little treat. Would you like to take your tea to Wizen Wood?'

The twins jumped for joy and said that they would love to.

'And you will come too?' asked Celia eagerly.

'I am very sorry, dear children, but I am afraid I couldn't manage it to-day,' Great-Aunt Susan told them, at which their faces suddenly fell. 'I have promised to attend a Mothers' Meeting at the Rectory this afternoon.'

'Oh, *what* a pity!' sighed the twins.

Great-Aunt Susan felt quite touched to think they should be so anxious for her company; and she promised that they should have another picnic some other day, when she would certainly come. Then she went on to explain that she could walk to the Rectory, which was not far away, and so Bolton should take them and the picnic basket round to the wood in the car.

'Don't try to carry the basket yourselves, my dears,' she added; 'it is much too heavy. Bolton will carry it for you to whichever part of the wood you choose.'

When the twins went out into the garden they lamented together about not being able to take Great-Aunt Susan to wish a wish after all; at least not this afternoon.

'And the moon will go on waning,' said Delia sadly, 'and p'raps there'll only be a teeny bit left when Great-Aunt Susan does have her wish.'

It did seem a sad pity; however, there was nothing to be done about it. And, of course, a picnic was always fun, even an ordinary one. Then a brilliant thought occurred to them both at once.

'Bolton!' cried Celia.

'Of course!' cried Delia.

Of course it would be splendid to give Bolton a wish! He was such a kind, obliging man, and had been their friend from the first evening when he had allowed them to sound the horn as much as they liked. And yesterday he had actually let them polish his lamps with most agreeably greasy rags. Certainly Bolton deserved a wish, and they must manage it somehow. Full of excitement about this new plan, they went skippiting off by one of their favourite and most private paths, a shrubbery path that ran almost alongside of the drive, yet was hidden from it by tall laurels and rhododendrons, and led at last to two equally attractive places. One of these was the great, big orchard with its trees heavily weighted by apples, all, alas! green and hard at present, and its long grass in which lay dozens of windfalls, no good to eat, but very amusing to play with and fling about. And the other was the Hornbeam Walk, which turned sharp to the right and ran all along the top of the orchard—a mysterious green shady way where the trees had been trained to grow into an arch overhead so that it was like walking down a green tunnel. The twins often went skippiting up and down the Hornbeam Walk, but just now they preferred to sit in the dappled sunshine under one of the trees in the orchard, and talk about their picnic and how they could best plan the wishing of Bolton's wish.

They decided that they would get him to carry the basket to the secret dell; and once he was there they felt that they and the magic between them ought to be able to do the rest.

'I do wonder what he will wish, don't you?' exclaimed Delia, hugging herself.

'Something sensible-er than Muriel's anyway!' said Celia decidedly.

And then at luncheon a difficulty arose. Great-Uncle James suddenly announced that he wanted the car that afternoon to take him to Ashbury, as he wished to have his hair cut.

Ashbury was their nearest town, about fifteen miles away.

'Oh, dear! What time would you want to go, James?' asked Great-Aunt Susan anxiously.

'Half-past three,' said Great-Uncle James firmly.

The twins' hearts sank: just the time Great-Aunt Susan had said they should start! What about their picnic? And what about Bolton's wish?

Great-Aunt Susan noticed their faces of disappointment.

'You couldn't go directly after luncheon?' she asked.

'Certainly not,' snapped Great-Uncle James. 'Several things to do first.'

And Great-Aunt Susan realized it was tactless of her to forget that he must have his afternoon nap.

'You don't want the car, hey?' demanded Great-Uncle James. 'You told me you wanted to walk to your—er—Sunday School Treat.'

'Mothers' Meeting, dear!' corrected Great-Aunt Susan. 'No, I don't want the car for myself; but I had promised the dear children they should have a picnic in the wood this afternoon, and Bolton was to drive them and the basket round there.'

'Picnic,' said Great-Uncle James testily, 'I know nothing about a picnic. Why wasn't I told? Never heard a word about it!'

Great-Aunt Susan said she was very sorry she hadn't told him.

'Can't they have their picnic to-morrow instead, hey?'

The twins tried to look as if they didn't mind, but of course to-morrow is never the same as to-day. It may always rain to-morrow.

But for once Great-Aunt Susan stood firm.

'*I promised* the children, James,' she said gently. 'Couldn't you have your hair cut to-morrow instead? And then I could come in too to have mine shampooed.'

But this it seemed was perfectly impossible. Great-Uncle James's hair had apparently grown to such a pitch that it *could* not be left another day.

'Then why not go into Ashbury after tea?' suggested Great-Aunt Susan soothingly. 'The children could have their picnic early and be back here by five. That would give you ample time, and it would be pleasanter driving in the cool of the late afternoon.'

Great-Uncle James grumbled that he was always the last person in the house to be considered, and nobody ever paid any attention to what he wished; but he supposed if he couldn't have the car before five o'clock, then five o'clock would have to do.

At which the twins, who had kept very mousey-quiet all this time, heaved sighs of relief.

At half-past three the large picnic-basket was placed in the car. The twins, full of excitement, got in beside Bolton, and waved their hands gaily to Parker, who watched them off from the top of the steps. Great-Aunt Susan had already gone to her Mothers' Meeting and Great-Uncle James had not emerged from the library.

Off they went, rolling crunchingly down the long drive. Mrs. Saunders heard the car coming and had the gates open for them, and the twins waved their hands to her too. They were feeling so joyful they would almost have waved to Saunders himself this afternoon. Then the car swung round to the left and along the main road, still at a slow and sober pace.

'*We* don't mind going fast, Bolton,' said Celia encouragingly.

But Bolton shook his head.

'It wouldn't do, missy,' he said regretfully. 'I've standing orders about the pace, and orders is orders, even when it's a picnic; else the mistress wouldn't ever trust me to take you out again.'

'Oh, well, never mind!' said Celia happily. 'The picnic's the lovely part, isn't it, Delia?' And she and Delia squeezed each other's hands and chuckled with delight.

They drove some distance along the main road, for it was a roundabout way to reach the wood, and then they turned sharply to the left again and up a pretty, shady lane.

'There's the wood! there's the wood!' sang the twins presently.

The car went, jolting slightly, up the rather rough lane alongside of the wood, and the twins could catch an occasional glimpse through the tall hedge of their dear Wizen Wood from a new aspect.

'How shall we know where to stop?' asked Celia with sudden anxiety.

'Yes, how shall we?' echoed Delia.

It would be dreadful if they could not manage to find the secret dell from this unknown side.

'Don't you worry, missies,' said Bolton cheerfully. 'There's a gate coming, and we'll stop there and walk in and along the path till you come to the right spot.' For the twins had explained carefully that there was one most special and perfect place for a picnic, and no other part of the wood could possibly do. 'There you are now!' he added, as they drew up by a little white wooden gate.

The twins hopped out eagerly, and were through the gate in a twinkling. Bolton followed in a more leisurely manner, carrying the basket. The twins hurried ahead, full of eagerness to explore the wood from this new

direction, and looking out intently for fear they might miss any familiar landmarks.

'It's all new so far!' said Celia, 'but still I'd have *known* it was Wizen Wood, even if I hadn't known it was,' she ended up rather obscurely. But Delia evidently understood her meaning, for she agreed with a vehement nod that she would too.

The wood was very cool and quiet and peaceful. The children's feet made scarcely any sound as they moved rapidly along the mossy path, but Bolton's heavier tread coming behind was more disturbing and sent some rabbits scurrying away into the undergrowth in an indignant manner. Presently the twins gave a sudden shout of satisfaction. There was the squirrel tree!

'We're just at the place, Bolton! We're just at the place!' they said excitedly, but sinking their tones to a more appropriate pitch.

'Very good, missies,' said Bolton.

'Just follow us!' said Celia importantly. And once more the twins went by their passage way through the trees and bushes, and Bolton and the basket came squeezing through after them.

'Well, this *is* a pretty place, right enough!' exclaimed Bolton, staring admiringly down at the little dell. 'How ever did you come to find it out?'

The twins explained briefly about the squirrel and Delia's ball.

'Well, that was a bit of luck, sure enough!' remarked Bolton. 'I've walked in this wood of a Sunday afternoon, just now and again, but I'd never have found this place, not if I'd come for a month o' Sundays. And that's a strange-looking bush!' he added, pointing to the unknown shrub with its blue flowers and bunches of berries. 'I never saw that growing anywhere else hereabout. It's a pretty thing too.'

BOLTON FELL ASLEEP.

'Yes, isn't it lovely,' said Celia rather breathlessly. 'And now, please, Bolton, we want you to put the basket down there, just under that bush, and then sit beside it yourself, just for a little while.'

'Very good, missy,' replied Bolton, and he seated himself obligingly in the secret dell, where the overhanging blossoms of blue almost dangled against his head.

'And, please, will you lean back and shut your eyes?' said Delia.

'Ah, it's a kind of a game, is it?' said Bolton good-naturedly, and he did as he was requested.

'And now, *please*, Bolton, will you wish a wish?'

'A wish, eh?' said Bolton, opening his eyes again, and trying not to smile too much as the little ladies seemed so serious about it. 'What sort of a wish, missy?'

'*Any* sort of wish,' said Celia encouragingly.

'Say what you wish to do most of all,' prompted Delia; using the word 'do' instead of 'have' without thinking, just because their own wish was a 'doing' one.

'What I wish to do, eh?' repeated Bolton, and his voice sounded as if the magic drowsiness had begun to work, while his mind was going back to a previous conversation with the twins.

And the wood-pigeons in the tops of the trees called to one another: Croooo croooo croooo, croo croo: croooo croooo croooo, croo croo: croooo croooo croooo, croo croo.

'Ah!' muttered Bolton, 'to take the old car along at sixty miles an hour; that's my wish!'

And then Bolton fell asleep.

CHAPTER IX

THE CONVENIENT PUMP

THE twins stood silently, hand-in-hand, never taking their eyes off Bolton. He stirred in his sleep. Yes, his hand was going up, just as Muriel's had done. It grasped and broke off a cluster of the berries. That was what they had done themselves! Then he sat up slowly, rubbing the berries mechanically between his hands. Next moment he came completely awake with a start of surprise, and sprang to his feet looking quite bewildered.

'I beg your pardon, missies!' he exclaimed. 'What was that you said? I declare I must have dropped off!'

'It's quite all right,' said Celia smiling.

'We didn't say anything,' said Delia, equally smiling.

Bolton stared.

'I thought I heard something,' he said. 'That's queer now, that is! You didn't say a bit o' po'try?'

'No, we didn't!' replied the twins, highly delighted. 'We really didn't!'

Bolton scratched his head in a perplexed manner.

'Well, I must have dreamt it!' he declared. 'I thought it was all a part o' the game.' Then he looked down at the berries in his hand as if they puzzled him too.

'What was the poetry you dreamed?' asked Delia curiously.

'Oh, do tell us!' said Celia eagerly.

But Bolton shook his head.

'I don't remember rightly,' he said. 'Some nonsense it must have been!' And he flung the crushed berries away into the bushes. He was not feeling best pleased with himself for falling asleep in such an extraordinary manner when he was on duty, so to speak. Stooping over the

picnic-basket, he undid the straps and opened the lid. 'There you are, now, missies! And now I must be off to keep my eye on the car. I'll come back and let you know when it's time to go.' And, wishing them a pleasant picnic, Bolton strode off, squaring his shoulders and generally pulling himself together after his curious lapse.

The twins turned to each other and smiled happily.

'He's wished a wish, and he doesn't know he has!' said Celia.

'He dreamed poetry, just as we did!' said Delia.

'Won't it be fun when it happens!' said Celia. 'Because he's got the magic on his hands now, so he must do it!'

'Is sixty miles an hour *very* fast?' asked Delia.

'Oh, yes, I expect it's *tremendously* fast,' said Celia.

'I was only wondering,' said Delia thoughtfully, 'about Great-Uncle James, you know.'

'Ooh, yes!' said Celia, also remembering that Great-Uncle James was to be driven this very afternoon to Ashbury to have his hair cut. 'I do wonder what he'll say! Oh, Delia! don't you wish we were going to drive with him?'

'It *would* be fun!' said Delia with a radiant smile.

However, now that they had brought off the first part of the afternoon's business successfully, their eyes fell on the picnic-basket and they suddenly began to feel hungry. It would never do to forget about the picnic itself.

They lifted the basket to a grassy patch under a hawthorn and overlooking the little dell, because somehow they felt it was not quite fitting to sit eating and drinking right in the magic place itself. And then, for the next few minutes, their attention was wholly taken up by unpacking the appetizing-looking, bumpy, white paper packets. There were little buttery rolls, and delicate jam sandwiches, and mustard-and-cress sandwiches, and sticky, sugary doughnuts, and fat sponge cakes, and thin chocolate

biscuits. These were all neatly spread out by the children on the white cardboard plates with a blue pattern round the edge, which they found at the bottom of the basket. And then, neatly fastened in the little divisions for the purpose, there were two cups and saucers, and a glass milk bottle dressed in a sort of wicker cover, with a funny stopper which opened and closed with a spring, most amusing to undo and do up again.

It was a most delicious picnic, and the twins sat down side by side on the grass and munched away happily.

'I'd like to have *all* our meals here!' observed Celia presently.

'So would I!' agreed Delia blissfully.

And there was really not much more conversation until the plates began to look strangely empty.

When they really could not eat any more they carefully scattered some crumbs around for the birds; for they always remembered the cross remarks of the fiery-crested wren to the too tidy children in the story of 'The Flamp'. Then they packed everything else tidily back into the basket, and sat down again for an interval of rest and reflection. They did not even want to go skippiting just immediately after that tea.

They began talking again about Bolton and his wish.

'There's one dreadful thing I've thought of,' announced Delia suddenly.

'Oh, what?' asked Celia anxiously.

'About Bolton,' said Delia. 'The magic's on his hands, and he won't be able not to wash his hands!'

'Oh, what a pity!' exclaimed Celia. 'Nor he will! Not after cleaning the car!' she added sadly.

They considered this unforeseen drawback with great concern.

'It will be a *dreadfully* short wish!' lamented Celia.

However, they soon began looking on the bright side.

Perhaps if Bolton had driven very often at sixty miles an hour Great-Uncle James might have been so angry with him that he wouldn't want to keep him for his chauffeur any longer. And perhaps Great-Aunt Susan might have been frightened by going so fast. Anyway, this afternoon Bolton would be able to do it for once, and that would probably be a great satisfaction to him.

But more than ever it did seem a pity they couldn't go for this one exciting drive with Great-Uncle James.

'P'raps we'll go home just now sixty miles an hour,' suggested Delia hopefully.

'Yes, but then that's such a teeny way,' said Celia in a dissatisfied tone. Then her face brightened rather mischievously, and she turned to look at Delia. '*Dare* we ask Great-Uncle James to take us?'

'*Dare* we?' repeated Delia very doubtfully.

'Yes, I will!' declared Celia boldly.

Delia gazed at her with large, admiring eyes.

'But I wonder what he will say?' she observed pensively.

They were still wondering when Bolton, little knowing that he had been the subject of so much conversation, came along to tell them that it was time to be moving.

'I'm sorry to have to hurry you away, missies,' he said, 'but it'd never do to be late for taking the master in to Ashbury.'

'Oh no, it wouldn't do at all!' said Celia decidedly.

'We're quite ready to come now,' said Delia.

And, to Bolton's surprise, they hurried ahead of him, going back along the path every bit as eagerly as they had come.

Bolton had turned the car, and it was facing in the direction of the high road. The twins scampered round to the far side, opened the door for themselves, and jumped up in front, slithering excitedly on to the leather seat. Bolton came round to see that their door was

properly shut. Then he stepped in, slammed-to his door, and started the car. Off they went, jolting rather down the lane, but not going fast at all.

This was very disappointing! Could it be that the magic had failed this time? But Bolton had dreamed the poetry, and he had rubbed his hands with the berries. It must be all right. And when they came to the end of the narrow lane and turned into the main road Bolton trod on the accelerator—and it *was* all right! The twins clutched each other in sudden joy as the car leapt forward and tore along the road at a terrific pace. This was going sixty miles an hour!

It was a smooth, empty piece of road, and the car travelled beautifully. Only the way the trees and hedges whizzed past and the sudden rush of air which lifted their hair straight on end made the children realize how fast they must be going. Oh, how lovely it was! They simply must go out again for the long drive with Great-Uncle James, because this sudden race came to an end all too soon. The distance which had seemed quite long earlier in the afternoon had now been covered in a minute or two. Bolton slowed down just in time to steer safely round through the gates; and in the drive he drove steadily and staidly as usual. Evidently the magic was only meant to work on the high road.

Bolton looked round uneasily at the twins.

'Phew!' he exclaimed, and mopped at his forehead with his large handkerchief. 'What ever could have possessed me to go like that! Why, I can't hardly believe it. D'you know how fast we were going then, missies?'

'Sixty miles an hour,' replied the twins promptly and calmly.

'You've hit it!' said Bolton with a groan. '*Sixty* miles an hour, and me never doing over twenty before! Something came over me and I couldn't help myself. I believe I

know what did it too,' he went on solemnly. 'It was "suggestion", that's what it was! I've read about the power of suggestion in the newspapers and a lot o' nonsense I thought it. But that's what it was for certain. Just before you go to sleep 's the time to do it, they say. And some say, "every day in every way I'm getting better and better," and they expect to *be* better for it too. But I went and said something about driving sixty miles an hour just before I dropped off in the wood, and, lumme, I've done it!'

The twins smiled quietly to each other. *They* knew it was magic, but if Bolton liked to call it something else, that didn't matter to them.

Then Bolton suddenly gave a queer sort of groan.

'Oh, what is the matter?' asked the twins anxiously.

'Just fancy!' he exclaimed; 'only *fancy* if I had been driving the master then!' His face was filled with horror at the mere thought of it.

The twins' consciences began to trouble them slightly. Ought they to explain to Bolton that he had better wash the magic off his hands if he did not want to do it again? No, they really *couldn't* spoil things so soon. Besides, that would be giving away the secret too much.

Owing to that quick spurt along the road the car was back at the house some little time before five o'clock. Bolton swerved it beautifully round on the gravel sweep so that it came to rest facing towards the drive once more. Then he got out and opened the door for the twins, who stepped out sedately, but announced their intention of waiting to see Great-Uncle James start. Bolton carried the basket indoors, and the twins rescued their hats, which had spent most of the afternoon on the floor of the car, and placed them on their heads, thinking, rightly, that Great-Uncle James would be more likely to take little girls with hats for a drive than little girls without hats. Then they

stood waiting patiently beside the car, looking as good and as innocent as they knew how.

Soon Great-Uncle James appeared, all ready for the start. He eyed the virtuous-looking twins rather suspiciously.

'Had a good time, hey?' he asked grimly.

'Yes, thank you, Great-Uncle James,' replied the twins together.

Then Great-Uncle James, thinking he had done all the conversation that was necessary, prepared to step into the car.

Celia felt desperate. She *must* do it. And Delia was squeezing her hand tightly to encourage her.

'Please, Great-Uncle James,' she blurted out with rather a pink face, 'please may we come with you?'

'Just for the drive, please,' added Delia pleadingly. She had often heard people use that expression, and thought it particularly suitable at the moment.

Great-Uncle James removed the foot he had placed on the step and turned to stare down at them.

'Want to come with me, hey?' he repeated. 'Just for the drive, ha?' There was a pause while he considered them doubtfully, and the twins stood holding their breath in suspense.

To tell the truth, Great-Uncle James had no particular wish to have two children in the car with him. He supposed they would fidget and ask questions, and altogether prove a disturbing element. And when he did not want a thing he usually said so very plainly. However, whether it was because the twins looked so very good, or because he was secretly a little flattered that they should wish to go with him, he suddenly gave the desired permission.

'Get some coats, then, and be quick about it,' he said gruffly.

'Oh, *thank* you!' cried the twins, and they disappeared in a flash to fetch their coats. Delia even suggested gloves as well, in case they should be pleasing to Great-Uncle James, but Celia considered that that would be going unnecessarily far.

'Jump in!' ordered Great-Uncle James, indicating the seat beside him. Bolton held the door for them and, although they would have preferred the front seat, they jumped in and sat sedately beside Great-Uncle James.

Down the drive the car sailed again, quite slowly and steadily, out of the gates and round into the road in the same direction it had taken before. But this time Bolton had a splendid long run in front of him. Fff—p!—The car gave a sudden spring forward and off they went, tearing along at sixty miles an hour!

Off went Great-Uncle James's hat, but luckily towards Celia, who managed to catch it. Celia clutched Great-Uncle James's hat with one hand and held her own on her head with the other. Delia held hers on with both hands.

'Hi! What! Bolton! The man's drunk! He's mad!' shouted Great-Uncle James in a fury. He grabbed his hat from Celia and then leant forward and rapped loudly and angrily on the glass.

But Bolton was going too fast to hear or heed Great-Uncle James. On they went, whizzing along most gloriously. Telegraph-posts, trees, hedges, walls, cows, cottages, gates, and gardens all seemed to be flying away in the opposite direction. And every time the car went over a bump in the road the twins and Great-Uncle James bounced up and down on the back seat.

'J—just like a j—jack-in-the-box!' gasped out Celia once.

But it was really not a time for conversation. The road

grew bumpier, and the twins, who were so much smaller and lighter than Great-Uncle James, bounced so much higher that they were quite relieved each time to find they had not bounced out of the car altogether. And Great-Uncle James, after shouting a great many curious and furious things at Bolton, became quite speechless and purple in the face with rage.

The twins, half alarmed and half enraptured, flung their hats down at their feet and held on to each other, wondering what would be the end of it all, and whether, after all, this wish of Bolton's was being altogether a success or not. Very soon they realized quite definitely that it was *not.*

Sounding his horn loudly and continuously, Bolton drove the car slap through a village street, past scuttling, screaming people, and jibbing horses and yelping dogs and nimble cats, and an outraged policeman who shouted and blew his whistle completely in vain. On shot the car, but the policeman, determined to uphold the dignity of the law, seized his motor bicycle, which was leaning against the wall of the police station, and, mounting in an instant, started in pursuit. On rushed the car; on rushed the policeman. The twins craned their heads over their shoulders and watched with alarm this following figure. Would they get away, or would the policeman catch them? Would they all be taken to prison if they were caught? Round a curve went the car and the policeman was lost to sight. Round the curve came the policeman, just as close behind them as before. Great-Uncle James was shouting something in a fury again and shaking his fist, but whether at Bolton or at the policeman the twins did not feel quite certain.

But the end was coming. The car approached a farmyard, and a crowd of clucking, agitated fowls ran suddenly across the road straight in front of it. The twins screamed

and Great-Uncle James swore. But Bolton had never run over a hen in his life, and, magic or no magic, he was not going to do it now. Jamming on his brakes suddenly, he swerved aside, just missed the hens, mounted with a nasty jolt into the stackyard, and came to an abrupt stop against a haystack.

They were all quite bewildered by the pace they had been going and then this sudden stop. Bolton sat staring at the haystack in a dazed manner. Great-Uncle James opened his mouth to speak, but had to allow some moments to elapse before he could think of words sufficiently bad to apply to Bolton and yet not too bad for the ears of his great-nieces. The twins gazed about them blankly and their eyes fell on a pump just a little way to the right of the car. Their minds awoke to one clear idea. The magic had better be removed from Bolton's hands as quickly as possible.

In less time than it takes to describe, Delia managed to open the door and jump out, followed by Celia. Then, by calling and tugging, they induced the still-dazed Bolton to get out and come with them to the pump.

'Quick, Bolton! wash your hands here! You must!' they cried.

And even in this short time the chuff-chuffing of the motor-bicyle had grown louder and louder, and in another moment it was almost deafening them. The policeman was upon them.

'Here! What's all this about?' he shouted in a fierce voice.

'Pump! Delia! Pump!' cried Celia distractedly.

The twins with all their might managed to move the stiff old pump handle up and down. A little water came trickling out, and Bolton obediently held his hands under the trickle and rubbed them together.

* * * * * * * *

'What's all this, sir?' asked the policeman in quite an altered tone to Great-Uncle James.

'Upon my soul, I don't know!' replied Great-Uncle James, looking most irate at finding himself sitting alone in his car, wedged against a haystack.

And by now an inquiring farmer had come upon the scene too.

Bolton stepped back and addressed Great-Uncle James.

'I'm very sorry, sir,' he said, 'it was them hens! I had to turn aside like that to avoid running over the lot of them.'

'Perfectly abominable!' declared Great-Uncle James angrily. 'People ought to keep their hens shut up properly. Why, we might have had a nasty accident if we'd been travelling fast.'

'Quite right, sir,' agreed the policeman. ''Ens ought not be on the 'igh road.' And he turned to the indignant farmer and told him so.

'What in the world are you two children about, playing with that pump?' demanded Great-Uncle James suddenly.

For the twins, still unconsciously holding the pump handle, were listening and staring in amazement.

Luckily Bolton answered for them, for they had no notion what explanation to give for themselves.

'I gave my thumb a bit of a sprain on the brake, sir,' he said apologetically, 'and the young ladies were so very kind as to pump the cold water for me to bathe it.'

'Won't interfere with your driving, will it?' asked Great-Uncle James gruffly.

'Oh no, sir! it's nothing to speak of,' declared Bolton, whose thumb really was a little swollen.

'Well, get in, all of you!' said Great-Uncle James testily. 'I don't want to spend the rest of my life looking at this wretched haystack!'

So the twins scrambled hastily in beside Great-Uncle James, and Bolton got in and backed the car carefully

on to the road again. Then, with a parting salute from the policeman and a surly touching of his hat from the farmer, the car went on down the road towards Ashbury at a slow and sober pace.

And nobody, except the astonished twins, had the faintest recollection that Bolton had ever been driving along the high road and straight through a village at sixty miles an hour!

CHAPTER X

GREAT-AUNT SUSAN'S WISH

HOW the twins did talk that evening at bedtime!—all about Bolton's wish and their exciting drive, and the strange way everybody had forgotten all about it.

'It's most *mysterious*!' they kept repeating; 'it's most *mysterious*!'

'Everybody forgot but us!' said Celia. 'It was the same about Muriel too, only that didn't seem quite so queer somehow.'

'I s'pose we don't forget because we've still got the magic on our heels,' said Delia thoughtfully.

For, shocking though their nurse would have considered it, of course, they still had their baths with the blue rubber bathing shoes on their feet, and then dabbled their toes in the soap-dish afterwards. Luckily their heels still looked quite pink and clean in spite of this unusual treatment, so perhaps the magic juice was dust-proof.

'Yes, I s'pose that's why,' said Celia.

'And it was funny that Bolton *had* to drive sixty miles an hour even when he didn't want to!' remarked Delia presently. ''Cause we don't do skippiting except when we want to.'

'I know,' said Celia. 'But isn't it a good thing we don't? Just fancy if we *had* to do it whenever we went out of doors!'

'How surprised Great-Aunt Susan and Great-Uncle James and everybody would be!' exclaimed Delia.

They chuckled together at the thought of all the astonished faces.

'It was lucky we said our wish diff'rently,' added Delia.

'It must be that that makes all the diff'rence. Oh, Celia! *aren't* you glad we've still got our lovely, *lovely* wish?'

And to show their extreme gladness they went skippiting round and round the room in their nightgowns until Mary appeared to tuck them up in bed.

But though all the possible dangers and difficulties to do with Bolton's wish had disappeared so easily and conveniently, a few days later the twins did really get themselves into deep disgrace. And unfortunately it happened the very day after Great-Aunt Susan had been showing them the photographs of Grandmother when she was a little girl.

The twins had never known this grandmother, who was their father's mother. Granny, who was their mother's mother, they knew well and often visited; in fact, they would probably have been staying with her now instead of at Andesley Hall, but that Granny was gaily going round the world. But Grandmother had died many, many years ago, long before the twins were born. She had been Great-Aunt Susan's younger sister, and one wet afternoon the old lady told the children tales of their childhood together and how Grandmother had been such a good, gentle little girl, who loved books and her sewing, and always kept herself so neat and tidy. The twins listened with deep interest to the stories, and gazed with eager curiosity at the faded old photographs of the grave child with her dark dresses and white pinafores, and hair parted in the middle and brushed sleekly back.

'Sometimes, my dears, you remind me of her just a tiny bit,' Great-Aunt Susan had said reflectively; adding hastily, 'in appearance, I mean, not in ways.'

The twins gazed at the photographs again and then looked critically at each other. They could not recognize any likeness themselves, but they felt that Great-Aunt Susan must know best.

And then the very next afternoon Great-Aunt Susan and Great-Uncle James had gone off together in the car to call on old friends who had recently come to live some ten miles away; and the twins, after waving them off, had started skippiting merrily down the drive, just far enough behind the car not to be seen. When they arrived in sight of the gates the car had disappeared down the road; and they were much interested to see Mrs. Saunders just going out too, in her best hat and black coat.

'I expect she's going to pay a call too,' remarked Celia.

The twins walked idly on towards the gates. They did not mean to go outside, for they had promised never to do that. They just stood near the entrance for a few minutes, wondering if they would see anything pass by. But nothing did. And then Celia's roving eyes rested on one of the square gateposts, and she had a sudden idea.

'Let's be griffins!' she suggested eagerly.

Delia welcomed the suggestion warmly.

'Oh yes, that would be lovely fun!' she exclaimed, clapping her hands.

Full of enthusiasm, they inspected the gates, but found these had certainly not been made to be climbed upon. Then they looked at the walls. These were too high just beside the gates; but the ground sloped upwards on either side away from the drive, and from there the walls looked more climbable, though still rather difficult. With some help from Celia, Delia managed to scramble up on the wall to the left of the gates. Then, having recovered her balance, she crawled along until she reached the gatepost, and climbing on to its flat surface she crouched there in the most griffin-like attitude she could manage.

'That's *splendid*!' cried Celia, dancing with excitement down below. 'Oh, Delia, you don't know how real it looks!'

"Do I look
like a griffin?"

'Do I look like a griffin?' asked Delia proudly.

'*Almost*!' cried Celia, with a good stretch of imagination, considering that griffins have eagle-like heads and lion-like bodies and never wear pink cotton dresses. 'Oh, I simply must get up too!'

She ran across to the other side, and, after exploring along the wall for a little, found a fairly low place with good footholds, and in a few minutes she was up on the wall and crawling along as Delia had done, till she mounted the other gate-post. Then there they both were, crouching opposite each other on the high gate-posts, their faces flushed with triumph.

'Oh, isn't it glorious!' cried Celia exultantly.

But Delia's face suddenly set sternly.

'We mustn't talk,' she said solemnly. 'We must just be like proper stone griffins.'

So they crouched there, silent and immovable, with fierce faces.

Presently they heard a car coming along the road, but, acting their parts realistically, they did not even turn their heads to look. The people in the car might think they really were part of the gate-posts.

But the car stopped just underneath them, and somebody gave a scream in a high voice, and somebody else gave a loud exclamation in a gruff voice. And the griffins suddenly looked down and—they wished they really could be turned into griffins of stone, just for the time being! For it was Great-Aunt Susan and Great-Uncle James, who were returning unexpectedly because Great-Aunt Susan had forgotten her card-case.

'They'll be killed! They'll be killed!' wailed Great-Aunt Susan. And indeed the sudden shock had made the twins waver on their high perches.

Great-Uncle James struggled to get himself out as quickly as he could, but by the time he managed it he

found that Bolton was out before him and had lifted down first one twin and then the other and placed them safely on solid ground.

'Oh, you naughty, *naughty* children!' exclaimed Great-Aunt Susan, her face quite white. 'What *were* you doing climbing up there in that dangerous way?'

And Great-Uncle James looked very fierce indeed, and even Bolton looked grave.

'We're very sorry, Great-Aunt Susan,' said the twins sadly.

'What made you do such a thing, hey?' demanded Great-Uncle James sharply.

'We—we wanted to be griffins,' faltered Celia.

'Wanted to be *what*?' shouted Great-Uncle James.

'Griffins,' repeated Celia unhappily. 'On the gate-posts.'

And Delia added in rather a trembling voice:

'Because you haven't got any here.'

Great-Uncle James stared up at the gate-posts, and then he stared down at the twins, standing there looking very small and disconsolate.

'Griffins! Bless my soul!' he exclaimed abruptly.

And Bolton hastily retired to the other side of the car to conceal the suspicion of a smile.

But poor Great-Aunt Susan could see nothing to smile at.

'It was a very *dreadful* thing for you to do!' she said gravely. 'Why, you might quite easily have fallen off and been killed! Just think if we had had to write to your poor father and mother in Switzerland to tell them a terrible accident had happened to their little girls!'

The twins hung their heads.

'Where on earth is Mrs. Saunders?' exclaimed Great-Uncle James irritably. 'What was she about to allow such a thing?'

As nobody else seemed to know, Celia lifted her head and said in a small voice:

'Mrs. Saunders went out. We saw her go.'

And then Great-Aunt Susan looked graver than ever, and asked if they did not think it was still naughtier to do wrong when everybody was safely out of the way.

The twins knew from experience it was no use explaining that they hadn't stopped to think at all, so they just hung their heads still lower and felt unhappy.

'Well, we can't stand here all day! Better take 'em back and shut 'em in the house!' remarked Great-Uncle James testily. 'Get into the car, children!'

The twins obediently got in at the front; Great-Uncle James and Bolton took their respective places; and a very solemn and gloomy party drove up to the house.

The twins looked so downcast that Bolton would have liked to offer a little sympathy, but he felt Great-Uncle James's eye upon him, so he did not dare.

Great-Aunt Susan kept murmuring to herself:

'Oh dear! oh dear! How can they think of such things! Such daring children! Such unusual children! So very unlike their dear grandmother!'

'H'm! very like their dear father!' remarked Great-Uncle James dryly.

When they arrived at the house Great-Aunt Susan felt so much shaken by the occurrence that she flatly refused to go out again. Great-Uncle James refused to go without her, so the expedition was given up altogether and the car taken back to the garage. The twins felt more guilty than ever.

Great-Uncle James retired into the library and banged the door, and Great-Aunt Susan was left to deal with the two culprits. She would have liked to forgive them straight away, they looked so contrite; but she felt it would not be right to treat the matter too leniently. She tried to think

back over many, many years and recollect what used to be considered a suitable task to set naughty little girls. And one thing started to her memory—hemming dusters! And as it happened, she had just bought some lately which needed hemming.

'Can you sew, dear children?' she asked them very seriously.

'Yes, Great-Aunt Susan,' replied the twins soberly.

'Well, run upstairs now and make yourselves quite clean and tidy, and then come down to the drawing-room and I will give you some sewing to do. And I think you had better change your dresses,' Great-Aunt Susan added, as she looked at the two little pink cotton frocks, which had not been improved by all the climbing and crawling on walls and gate-posts.

'Yes, Great-Aunt Susan,' said the twins. And they went sadly upstairs to their room.

About a quarter of an hour later, clad in clean blue smocks, the twins were sitting side by side on two little chairs in the drawing-room, diligently hemming dusters and hating it. They wished very much that they had not tried to be griffins, since the game had had such doleful consequences.

But more consequences were to follow, as you will see.

The next morning Great-Aunt Susan announced at breakfast-time that as it was such a lovely day she thought she and the twins had better have their promised picnic together in Wizen Wood.

The twins' spirits promptly went up with a bound, and they said, with beaming faces, that it would be lovely.

Great-Uncle James remarked gloomily that in *his* young days naughty children were not rewarded by picnics; but then Great-Uncle James was never at his best at breakfast-

time; and Great-Aunt Susan said quite firmly that everything was forgiven now that they had started a new day.

But though Great-Aunt Susan had forgiven yesterday's escapade she had not forgotten it; and one of her reasons for proposing the picnic was that, for this one afternoon at least, she might know where the children were and what they were doing, and be able to keep them under her eye.

And the twins themselves were also remembering yesterday, when Great-Aunt Susan had been so much distressed, and they felt really glad that they were going to have this chance to make up for it all. For, of course, the long-looked-for opportunity had come, and Great-Aunt Susan at last would be able to wish a wish in Wizen Wood!

All the morning, while the twins went skippiting happily about the grounds or sat sunning themselves in the flower garden, they kept wondering what would happen this time in the secret dell. Anyway, they felt quite certain that Great-Aunt Susan would not wish a foolish wish like Muriel Mellon, or a rash one like Bolton.

At half-past three Great-Aunt Susan and the twins and the picnic-basket were all packed into the car, and Great-Uncle James actually came out to see them start.

'Why don't you come for the picnic too, James?' asked Great-Aunt Susan gaily.

The twins looked rather anxious, for they felt that Great-Uncle James's presence would seriously interfere with their plans. But they need not have been afraid, for Great-Uncle James was very firm in his refusal.

'No picnics for me, thank ye!' he said gruffly. 'Sitting about on the damp ground, asking for lumbago!'

'Oh no, the ground *couldn't* be damp on a day like this!' replied Great-Aunt Susan reassuringly.

'And being devoured by insects!' continued Great-

Uncle James firmly. 'When I have a meal I like to eat, and not be eaten!' And he chuckled grimly at his little joke.

So the car drove off without him, and the twins breathed freely again.

When they reached the end of the drive everybody carefully tried *not* to look at the gate-posts, and Great-Aunt Susan hastily and kindly started to make conversation.

'When we were children, my dears, sometimes for a great treat your grandmother and I used to go out with our maid for a long afternoon, taking tea with us. There was one favourite place beside a little stream that we would always choose. I can see it now! And then we would take our sewing too, so that we shouldn't be idle while we were enjoying the fresh air.'

The twins looked a little dubious at this notion of how to pass the time at a picnic.

'Didn't you ever paddle in the stream?' asked Celia.

'No dear, never,' said Great-Aunt Susan. 'We didn't run about with bare legs in those days, you know.'

The twins felt glad that they hadn't lived in those days.

When they drove along by the wood Great-Aunt Susan grew quite eager.

'It *is* nice to be going into the dear wood again!' she exclaimed. 'It is far too long since I came here last. And how cool and inviting it does look, to be sure! I think you were wise children to find your way here so soon.'

And the twins hugged themselves with the thought that they were really wiser than Great-Aunt Susan knew.

The car drew up once more at the little white wooden gate, and they all got out, Bolton first handing out Great-Aunt Susan and then grasping the picnic-basket.

'Now, you lead the way, my dears,' said Great-Aunt

Susan to the twins, 'for this is your picnic, so you must choose where you would like to go best.'

So the twins started off down the path, not too fast this time out of consideration for Great-Aunt Susan, but giving little skips of joy as they went. And Great-Aunt Susan followed, exclaiming at the loveliness all round her, and declaring she had really forgotten how beautiful it was in Wizen Wood. But when the twins had piloted her safely through the bushes and stood proudly on the verge of the little dell, saying: '*Now*, Great-Aunt Susan! Isn't it *lovely*!' she could hardly find words to express her delight.

'Oh, my dears!' she exclaimed at last, 'it is like a little bit of Fairyland!'

'It is, *just* like!' agreed the twins gleefully.

'And to think I have lived here all these years and never found it out before!' exclaimed Great-Aunt Susan. 'Why, I am sure your great-uncle has never seen it either; we must certainly bring him here one day. Now I wonder what lucky chance led you to discover it?'

So the twins had to explain again just what had happened.

And then, Bolton having taken his departure after placing the basket on the grassy patch under the hawthorn, as Celia directed, the twins felt the moment had come.

'Please, Great-Aunt Susan,' said Celia coaxingly, 'will you rest for a little bit first in the little dell?'

'It feels so lovely and comf'table there,' said Delia encouragingly.

'Very well, my dears,' agreed Great-Aunt Susan, ready to do all she could to please and amuse the children. 'I think it would be very delightful indeed to rest in such a sweet spot!' And, guided by the twins, she sank down a little suddenly in the secret dell, just under the bush with the strange blue flowers. 'I think you will have to help

me up again presently,' she added a little ruefully, 'for I am growing rather old for sitting upon the ground.'

'*We'll* pull you up all right; we're very strong,' promised Celia hastily. 'And now, *please*, Great-Aunt Susan, will you lean back and shut your eyes?'

But Great-Aunt Susan proved unexpectedly suspicious.

'And what mischief do you mean to be up to while my eyes are shut?' she inquired.

'Oh, *no* mischief at all!' cried Celia, quite hurt at the suggestion.

'We aren't going to do anything at all!' cried Delia.

So Great-Aunt Susan, feeling reassured, leant back and closed her eyes.

'I could sleep very happily here in good earnest,' she said comfortably. 'The ground is so soft, and the scent of the thyme is so sweet, and the crooning of the wood-pigeons is so soothing.' Great-Aunt Susan's voice already began to sound a little sleepy.

'And now, *please*, Great-Aunt Susan,' said Celia quickly, 'will you wish a wish?'

Great-Aunt Susan opened her eyes again and looked at the twins as they stood side by side gazing down upon her with eager, flushed faces. 'What dear, charming-looking children they are!' she thought affectionately. 'And what a thousand pities they should sometimes be so wild and rash!' she added to herself sadly, remembering, with a little shudder, the day before and the sight of those two little figures perched at such a perilous height on the gate-posts.

'A wish! What shall I wish?' she asked aloud, her mind still full of this picture.

'Oh, just wish for anything!' implored Celia.

'Wish for something you would like very much!' begged Delia.

Great-Aunt Susan's head began to nod drowsily.

And the wood-pigeons in the tops of the trees called to one another: Croooo croooo croooo, croo croo: croooo croooo croooo, croo croo: croooo croooo croooo, croo croo.

'I wish, dear children,' murmured Great-Aunt Susan gently, 'that you would behave like your dear grandmother when she was a little girl.'

And then Great-Aunt Susan fell asleep.

CHAPTER XI

BEHAVING LIKE GRANDMOTHER

THE twins looked at each other rather doubtfully. Somehow this did not sound a very satisfactory sort of wish at all. Then they looked down again on Great-Aunt Susan. She was slumbering lightly, just as any pretty old lady may do occasionally on a warm afternoon without disturbing her hat or disarranging her hair, and her hands stayed quietly folded in front of her. Suddenly a tiny breeze woke in the bush under which she slept, gently stirring the leaves and fluttering the blue flowers, and one dangling spray swayed towards her, just touching and ruffling a few short silvery hairs upon her cheek. Then Great-Aunt Susan woke and sat up a little suddenly, while she put up a hand to pat her hair back into its usual position.

'Dear me!' she said rather reproachfully; 'you naughty children induced me to fall asleep after all! I must really keep my eyes open now. That is not the way to behave at a picnic at all!'

The twins looked and felt rather puzzled. *Had* anything really happened this time? They did not know what to hope. Of course they wanted Great-Aunt Susan to be pleased. But what might be going to happen to them? Certainly they *felt* just the same as usual.

'Please, Great-Aunt Susan, did you dream anything?' asked Celia anxiously.

'I fancy I did,' replied the old lady reflectively. 'Yes, I think I must have been dreaming for a moment. There seemed to be something unusual, all mixed up with the sound of the wood-pigeons.'

'Oh, do tell us about it, please!' said Delia eagerly.

But Great-Aunt Susan shook her head.

'It has quite disappeared from my mind now, whatever it was; I never can remember my dreams after I wake. And perhaps it is just as well,' she added briskly, 'for dreams are great nonsense at the best of times. And now, help me up, dear children, because if I stay here any longer I may be tempted to sleep again.'

The twins each took one of Great-Aunt Susan's hands and gently and politely helped her to her feet.

'Thank you, my dears,' she said, 'you did that very nicely.'

But the twins were feeling a little uneasy. It sounded as if Great-Aunt Susan *was* going to have her wish after all. And was that *quite* the way they usually pulled people up? Well, they must just wait and see, and hope for the best: two pieces of advice which their nurse gave them occasionally.

When the picnic-basket was unpacked and the contents all spread out, it looked a regular feast.

'I told Mrs. Jackson to provide plenty of good things,' said Great-Aunt Susan with a kindly smile, 'because I know two little girls who have very good appetites!'

But Great-Aunt Susan was soon disappointed to find that the twins' appetites seemed to have dwindled to very small ones indeed this afternoon. They ate a little in rather a prim fashion, and then said gently that they did not want any more. Great-Aunt Susan wondered if she could possibly have hurt their feelings by that reference to their appetites. But no, the twins were never so foolishly sensitive as that.

'Do have a nice doughnut, my dear,' she said to Celia, 'or a piece of cherry cake? Why, you have eaten nothing!'

But Celia still refused.

'No, thank you, *really*, Great-Aunt Susan,' she said sedately.

'Then Delia must,' coaxed Great-Aunt Susan. 'Why, Mrs. Jackson's feelings will be very much hurt! She will think you don't care for her cakes.'

But Delia, very politely, regretted that she could not eat any more.

'Why, what can be the matter with you both?' asked Great-Aunt Susan anxiously. 'I suppose it must be the hot day,' she added kindly.

But the twins knew what was the matter quite well. Without a shadow of doubt, they were behaving like Grandmother when she was a little girl!

After the tea-things had been all neatly packed away, the twins sat very quietly one on each side of Great-Aunt Susan while she told them stories of long ago. They listened with grave interest, but were not so ready with comments and questions as usual. And later, when Bolton came to fetch the basket, Great-Aunt Susan noticed how quietly they went back along the path, one beside her, and the other following close behind. They had almost danced along when they first came into the wood.

'I hope the dear children enjoyed their picnic,' she said to Great-Uncle James, after they had reached home and the twins had gone soberly upstairs. 'They seemed a little unlike themselves, I thought. So very quiet!'

'H'm! I don't see that *that's* anything to complain about!' grunted Great-Uncle James from behind *The Times*.

'And they made such a very poor tea,' said Great-Aunt Susan regretfully.

'They did themselves uncommonly well at lunch,' remarked Great-Uncle James unfeelingly.

The curious thing was that Great-Aunt Susan never even remembered her wish that the children should behave like their grandmother. She had said it when she was

already half-asleep, and perhaps, being an old lady, her memory was not quite so good as it had been.

While she described the delightful little dell where they had had their tea, and told Great-Uncle James that he really must see it one day because it was the prettiest place imaginable, the twins were sitting side by side on Celia's bed, talking things over dismally. For a dreadful thing had happened. The moment they reached their room they had been seized by a sudden doubt, and both together had tried to start skippiting. But, alas! they could not do it at all! Grandmother had never done such a thing when she was a little girl, and so now they could not do it either. No wonder they looked miserable!

'And I don't see how *this* wish can end,' said Celia sadly, 'because there doesn't seem to be anything to wash off this time. Great-Aunt Susan never touched the flowers or the berries!'

'P'raps it will go on till the moon wanes right away!' lamented Delia, 'and then that would mean we couldn't ever do skippiting any more!'

This thought was so tragic that they were really very near tears when Mary came in with their supper, and she noticed at once how subdued they seemed.

'Aren't you feeling very well?' she asked with kindly concern. For when the picnic-basket had returned with so many good things untouched, it had caused some comment in the kitchen.

'Yes, thank you, Mary, we're quite well,' replied the twins quietly.

'Did you not enjoy your picnic?' inquired Mary, good-naturedly.

But the twins assured her that they had enjoyed it very much.

'All the spirit seems to have gone out of them,' thought Mary. 'I wonder what's wrong. They must be feeling

homesick all of a sudden, surely.' She stayed trying to chat with them for a few minutes, and the twins answered her questions politely, but did not seem nearly so communicative as usual. So presently she went downstairs feeling quite concerned about them.

Great-Aunt Susan, who had just come up the front stairs, heard Mary in the passage and opened the landing door.

'Are the dear children quite all right, Mary?' she asked. 'I thought they seemed a little unlike themselves the latter part of this afternoon.'

'Why, that's just what I was thinking, mum,' said Mary seriously. 'They're so quiet and dull-like, instead of jumping and skipping about like their usual.'

'Dear! dear!' said Great-Aunt Susan in a worried voice, 'I do hope they are not going to be ill! And only yesterday I was a little hard on them about their climbing up on the gate-posts. Yes, perhaps I was too severe. Poor little things, they have really given us so little trouble on the whole!'

'Yes, indeed, mum!' said Mary. 'When you think what children are, they've been wonderful good, that they have!'

Now Mary had more than once been heard to complain since the twins' arrival that never were there such children for dirtying their frocks, and she might as well have been a laundry-maid at once with all the washing and ironing she had to do to keep them in clean clothes. But all the twins' misdemeanours were quite forgotten now there was a fear that they might be ill.

'Poor little dears!' said Great-Aunt Susan.

'Poor lambs!' said Mary.

'I will go upstairs and have a look at them when I am dressed,' said Great-Aunt Susan.

So, after the twins were in bed, they had a visit from

their anxious great-aunt, who begged them to tell her if they felt any aches or pains anywhere. But they assured her that they felt perfectly well.

'Good night, then, my dears,' said Great-Aunt Susan, kissing them both tenderly. 'And I hope you will be *quite* yourselves again in the morning!'

But, as Celia remarked in rather an aggrieved voice when they were alone, it was no use hoping that now after wishing a wish in Wizen Wood that they should behave like somebody else.

'But Great-Aunt Susan doesn't seem to remember her wish a bit,' said Delia, wrinkling up her forehead in her effort to understand things. 'It's all very puzzling.'

'I know,' said Celia; 'but you know Bolton didn't remember his properly. He called it something quite different.'

'I suppose it's because they're grown-ups,' observed Delia, 'and so they don't believe in wishes.'

'I suppose that's why,' agreed Celia; 'because Muriel remembered about hers all right.'

'She didn't remember her dream properly, though,' said Delia, 'because she didn't know about the touch of water washing away the magic!'

'No, it's funny,' said Celia. 'Nobody else seems to remember their dreams so well as us.'

'I suppose it's because we're twins,' remarked Delia after a pause for reflection. Then she quoted another of Nurse's maxims: 'Two heads are better than one!' And this really seemed to fit the case very well.

'*P'raps* after Great-Aunt Susan has had her bath her wish will be finished!' suggested Celia presently; but she did not sound very hopeful.

'P'raps,' said Delia, still more doubtfully.

'We shall always know,' went on Celia, still trying to hope for the best, 'because when it's gone, *then* we shall be able to do skippiting again!'

When Mary came to call them the next morning she found them wide awake, but each lying quietly in her own bed, a very unusual state of affairs.

'How do you feel this morning, missies?' she asked anxiously.

'Quite well, thank you, Mary,' replied the twins soberly.

'Are you sure of it?' persisted Mary. 'The mistress says wouldn't you like your breakfasts in bed?'

'*No*, thank you, Mary,' replied the twins quite firmly, and they sat up in bed and certainly looked very far from being invalids.

As they began to dress themselves Celia suddenly looked at Delia.

'Why are we putting on socks this morning? It isn't Sunday,' she said.

'Yes, why are we?' echoed Delia. And then she added: 'Why, I suppose it's because *she* did!'

'She *would*,' remarked Celia gloomily.

It was dreadfully shocking, but they were really beginning to take quite a dislike to Grandmother-when-she-was-a-little-girl.

'Let's take them off again!' said Celia recklessly.

But they couldn't. Their hands merely pulled the socks up a little straighter and patted them neatly into position.

When they were dressed they each dipped their hair-brushes in water and then sleeked their hair down as close to their heads as possible. Then they surveyed each other.

'You look very queer!' observed Celia.

'So do you!' returned Delia.

'So did Grandmother-when-she-was-a-little-girl,' remarked Celia thoughtfully.

'I'm sure Great-Aunt Susan must have had her bath by now,' said Delia sadly.

In a very half-hearted manner they tried once more to do skippiting, but of course it was of no use.

"WHY ARE WE PUTTING
ON OUR SOCKS ?"
A.H. Watson

When the gong sounded they went sedately downstairs to breakfast. Great-Aunt Susan came hurrying down after them.

'Good morning, dear children, are you really feeling quite well this morning?' she asked, gazing at them anxiously.

'Quite well, thank you, Great-Aunt Susan,' replied the twins gravely.

'They don't *look* quite themselves,' thought Great-Aunt Susan, not realizing that the difference lay in the sleeked-down hair, which had a demure, almost depressed, appearance compared with their usual fluffy mops.

When they reached the dining-room Great-Uncle James also cast several puzzled glances towards the twins.

'Now you must make a really good breakfast, to please me!' said Great-Aunt Susan.

But Grandmother-when-she-was-a-little-girl had not cared for romping and running about, and so her appetite had been a small one.

Presently Great-Uncle James offered the twins rolls. They usually ate several rolls with honey.

'No, thank you, Great-Uncle James,' said Celia.

'No, thank you, Great-Uncle James,' said Delia.

Great-Aunt Susan looked at them with concern, and Great-Uncle James looked at them with suspicion.

'Been paying too many visits to the kitchen-garden, hey?' he inquired gruffly. 'Been enjoying yourselves among the gooseberries and raspberries, ha?'

'Oh *no*, Great-Uncle James,' replied the twins primly.

'We *never* go to the kitchen-garden without Great-Aunt Susan,' added Celia.

Then Great-Aunt Susan had another idea, which she tried to put as delicately as possible.

'When you go down by the orchard, my dears, you never —er—*taste* the green apples, do you?'

'Oh *no*, Great-Aunt Susan,' replied the twins more primly than ever.

'Oh no, I was quite sure you wouldn't!' went on Great-Aunt Susan hastily. 'But, you see, we can't think where you lost those nice appetites of yours.'

The twins made no reply, but they looked a little pensive. *They* knew that their nice appetites were lost in Wizen Wood, and they wondered how long it would be before they recovered them again.

'And what would you like to do now?' Great-Aunt Susan asked them when breakfast was over. It was another glorious summer's day, and she expected to hear that they would like to play about in the gardens as usual. But to her surprise Celia replied:

'Shall we bring down our books and do a little reading first?'

Now the twins had never before shown any desire to do a little reading when they might have been out of doors, so Great-Aunt Susan could hardly believe her ears.

'And is that what you would like too, Delia?' she asked anxiously.

'Yes, thank you, Great-Aunt Susan,' replied Delia.

So the twins fetched two books, and then settled themselves on two little chairs in the drawing-room and began to read most studiously. An hour later Great-Aunt Susan looked in and found them with their heads still bent over their books.

'Oh, don't you think you should shut up your books now, dear children, and go out into the garden this lovely morning?' she said persuasively.

The twins obediently shut up their books and took them tidily upstairs. When they reappeared in the hall they were wearing their shady hats, and each carried her teddy-bear in her arms wrapped in flowing white draperies (which, as a matter-of-fact, were their face towels), as the

nearest approach to the baby dolls beloved of Grandmother-when-she-was-a-little-girl. They went soberly along the passage and out by the door on to the terrace, where they walked up and down with slow steps and gloomy faces, dandling their bear-babies most unwillingly. For although they had to *behave* like Grandmother-when-she-was-a-little-girl, they still *felt* like themselves; and so the things that she had done from choice they found very boring indeed.

Presently Great-Aunt Susan came out too, and felt quite distressed to see them walking up and down in this spiritless way. She took them into the flower-garden with her, but, unfortunately, since she feared they were not very well, she did not take them to pay their usual morning visit to the kitchen garden, which probably even Grandmother-when-she-was-a-little-girl would have enjoyed.

The morning dragged on slowly, because the loveliest flowers are wasted on people who are in quite the wrong mood.

'Dear me,' said Great-Aunt Susan to herself, 'I am glad they are not always so difficult to amuse, poor little things!' For the twins kept close to her side all the time, and yet they did not look happy. 'Wouldn't you rather run away and have a good romp together?' she asked them once.

But they only shook their heads and answered quietly:

'No thank you, Great-Aunt Susan.'

Great-Aunt Susan grew more and more worried and perplexed. She looked at them anxiously and felt their hands to see if they were feverish. But no, their hands were cool and their cheeks as rosy and healthy-looking as possible. 'Can they have anything on their minds?' she thought uneasily. Perhaps they had broken something in the house, or done some damage in the garden, and were afraid to say so. But then this odd quietness had come on yesterday afternoon while they were out with her and

couldn't possibly have been getting into any mischief. Poor Great-Aunt Susan sighed audibly. She felt she did not understand children, and evidently she was too old to begin now.

The twins would have liked to sigh too, because here they were with all their fun spoilt by Great-Aunt Susan's wish, and here was Great-Aunt Susan not a bit happier for all their behaving like Grandmother-when-she-was-a-little-girl! It did seem such dreadful waste of good magic.

However, luncheon time came at last, to everybody's relief, and the long and dreary morning was at an end.

As they ate their roast mutton, Great-Aunt Susan said to Great-Uncle James that she thought this afternoon she really must drive into Ashbury to have her hair shampooed, and would he like to come too, or was there anything she could do for him in the town.

Great-Uncle James said no; he would not come, but he needed some more tobacco.

Great-Aunt Susan promised that Bolton should get that while she was at the hairdresser's. Then she looked doubtfully at the children.

'I think, dear children, if you are not quite the thing it would be wiser for you to stay quietly in the garden this afternoon. You would be quite happy to do that, wouldn't you?'

'Yes, thank you, Great-Aunt Susan,' replied the twins politely.

'And what would you like to do to amuse yourselves?' asked Great-Aunt Susan encouragingly.

The twins considered the question thoughtfully.

'We might take our sewing out,' suggested Celia gravely.

'Your sewing?' inquired Great-Aunt Susan in surprise.

'Yes, the dusters, you know,' replied Celia rather primly.

'It would be a pity not to finish them now we have begun,' added Delia seriously.

Great-Aunt Susan looked from one to the other rather helplessly.

'Just as you like, my dears,' she said, 'but never mind about the dusters if you would rather run about and play. One of the maids could always finish them for me.'

But the twins announced quite firmly that they would like to finish the dusters, so Great-Aunt Susan felt there was nothing more to be said. Trying to hide her perplexity, she told Parker to telephone to the hairdresser for an appointment.

A few moments later Parker returned.

'Will three o'clock be convenient to you, m'm?'

'Perfectly, thank you, Parker,' said Great-Aunt Susan.

After luncheon the twins fetched their hats from their room and the dusters from Great-Aunt Susan's work-table, and went quietly out by the front door and round into the garden. They chose a seat in the shade, and diligently set to work on their hemming. Great-Aunt Susan found them there when she was ready to start.

'Don't work *too* hard, my dears,' she said uneasily.

'We haven't so *very* much more to do,' replied Celia gravely; and they both offered their dusters for inspection.

'Very nice indeed!' said Great-Aunt Susan in worried tones.

'I think we shall finish them before you come back,' said Delia earnestly.

So Great-Aunt Susan had to leave them and go to the car, feeling more worried and anxious than ever.

'And they have *always* come to wave the car off before,' she said to herself, as the car started down the drive in the flattest manner with nobody taking the least notice; for Great-Uncle James was sound asleep in the library and snoring. 'They are quite unlike themselves, and they *must* be going to be ill!' And all the way to Ashbury poor Great-

Aunt Susan was working herself into a state of misery about the strange, unnatural behaviour of her great-nieces.

About three o'clock the twins simultaneously finished hemming the dusters. They folded them up very neatly and started on their way towards the front door to take them indoors, and put them tidily away in Great-Aunt Susan's room.

* * * * * * * *

Great-Uncle James was suddenly roused from his slumbers by loud shrieks. He heaved himself out of his chair and hurried to the window in great alarm, not knowing what he might see. And what he did see was the twins, apparently gone perfectly mad. They were running round in circles and capering about, waving something that looked like large checked handkerchiefs over their heads, and screaming at the top of their voices. Then suddenly they sat down in the middle of the drive and proceeded to take off their sandals and socks. Great-Uncle James threw up his window.

'Hey!' he shouted out.

The twins looked up smilingly.

'What are you two children about? Have you gone quite mad?' he demanded wrathfully.

'Oh no, Great-Uncle James!' called back the twins joyfully, quite forgetting in their excitement to say they were sorry. They put on their sandals again, and then, each with a duster in one hand and a pair of socks in the other, they went careering into the shrubbery.

Great-Uncle James made several indignant sounds.

'What'll they be up to next?' he exclaimed testily, as he slammed down the window with a loud bang.

What the twins were up to was skippiting madly down the shrubbery path, right away to the Hornbeam Walk, and up and down and up and down and up and down the Hornbeam Walk, waving the dusters and socks and

shouting with joy all the time, till they were quite out of breath, and had to throw themselves down full length into the long grass under an apple tree.

'How *did* it come to an end?' exclaimed Celia, when she had had time to collect her breath and her senses together.

It was Delia who thought of the answer first, and then they both exclaimed together, saying how silly they were not to have thought of it before! Of course a spray of the magic flowers had just touched Great-Aunt Susan's hair while she slept, and of course the moment her hair was shampooed the magic had been washed away!

Great-Aunt Susan enjoyed her drive back from Ashbury very much, the country was looking so pretty and her mind was feeling so free of care.

'Well, dear James,' she said happily as Great-Uncle James came to the door to meet her, 'how have you been getting on?'

Great-Uncle James grunted gloomily as if to say that he had not been getting on at all.

'Your great-nieces have gone mad,' he informed her abruptly.

'Oh, I hope not!' exclaimed Great-Aunt Susan, rather surprised. 'What have they been doing now?'

'Only making the most appalling din and racing about like lunatics directly under my window,' replied Great-Uncle James.

'Dear children!' said Great-Aunt Susan affectionately. 'They always have such high spirits!'

CHAPTER XII

GREAT-UNCLE JAMES'S WISH

AFTER tea Great-Aunt Susan chose to rest quietly on the drawing-room sofa with a new book, and Great-Uncle James went off as usual to the library with the newspaper; so the twins had a glorious and undisturbed time of skippiting all round and about the grounds. They were so happy that they sang all the songs they knew, and when they had finished them all they sang some more which they invented as they went along; and great nonsense they were, but the twins didn't mind that, and there was no one else to hear. The result of all this was that when bed-time came, and when Mary had at last after some difficulty managed to persuade them into their beds, there was no time for any conversation at all, for they fell fast asleep almost as soon as their heads touched their pillows.

But the next morning, as soon as they woke, Celia got into Delia's bed and they had a long and solemn talk. And they agreed together that never again would they take anyone to wish a wish in Wizen Wood. They had tried three times, and each time had ended in failure. They considered them all carefully.

First, there was Muriel Mellon's wish: that had only made her dreadfully conceited, and had sent her tumbling into the pond at last.

Second, there was Bolton's wish, and that had made Great-Uncle James extremely angry, and caused them to be chased by a policeman, besides nearly being the death of several hens.

Third, there was Great-Aunt Susan's wish, and that

had really been the worst of all, for it had lasted longest and been so dreadfully dull and dismal the whole time.

No, it was a terrible pity, but other people's wishes always turned out badly, and it was too great a risk to try again.

'Anyway,' said Celia consolingly, after a little pause, 'there isn't anybody much else to take, unless perhaps Mary.'

'No,' said Delia reflectively, 'we couldn't expect Parker to go to sleep in the secret dell!'

They chuckled at the thought, for Parker was rather portly and pompous.

'Or Saunders!' suggested Celia.

They chuckled still more at the idea of venturing to lead the fierce Saunders to wish a wish in the secret dell.

'Or Great-Uncle James!' exclaimed Delia.

And at that notion they laughed so loudly and uproariously that Mary opened the bedroom door to ask what was the matter.

After this the twins decided they couldn't stay in bed another minute, so they dressed quickly and raced downstairs and out into the lovely summer's morning, where a little gentle wind was frisking the flowers and leaves about in a cheerful manner. They ran round the flower garden first, where they met Saunders, who bade them a suspicious 'good morning', and an under-gardener, who touched his cap and grinned in a friendly manner. Then they visited the farmyard, where their friend the farmer's wife gave them each a lovely pale brown, new-laid egg, and, at their request, made a large C on one and a large D on the other with her special pencil, so that there should be no mistake about them. They quickly ran back to the house with these and took them through to Mrs. Jackson, who promised that they should have them for breakfast. Then they went skippiting all the way down to the orchard and

back. So that, altogether, by the time the gong sounded, they went into the house to have their breakfast feeling extremely hungry and happy.

But at breakfast, just while the twins were enjoying their boiled eggs marked C and D, Great-Uncle James suddenly announced that he felt like a walk this fine, fresh morning, and he meant to walk to the wood to see that something or other—what did they call it—dell place?—he had heard so much about. And as, of course, it was too far for Great-Aunt Susan to walk all the way, the children should go with him to show him the place.

The twins sat with their egg-spoons half-way from their mouths down to their eggs again (luckily they were empty) while they stared at Great-Uncle James with surprise and consternation. For one wild moment they thought he must know all about everything. It seemed so extraordinary that he should make this suggestion just when they had settled that they would never take anybody to the secret dell again. And they had laughed so much at the very idea of ever taking Great-Uncle James!

Great-Uncle James was busy disentangling a herring, so he did not see the way in which the children received his announcement, but Great-Aunt Susan did.

'Only if you would like to go, my dears,' she said kindly. 'If you don't want to go quite so far this morning I am sure another day would do just as well for your great-uncle.'

'Hey, what's that? Who doesn't want to go?' asked Great-Uncle James, looking up from his herring indignantly.

So the twins said hurriedly and politely that they would like to go with Great-Uncle James very much; and then they tried not to look too much taken aback by the prospect.

'But of course we won't let Great-Uncle James wish a wish!' said Delia rather anxiously after breakfast.

'No, we won't!' said Celia firmly.

But she was reckoning without Great-Uncle James.

They did not start for their walk till after eleven o'clock, as Great-Uncle James had some business to discuss with his agent first; so the twins went with Great-Aunt Susan for their usual middle-of-the-morning visit to the kitchen garden.

'Dear me!' said Great-Aunt Susan, 'I don't believe we paid our usual visit here yesterday, did we?'

'No,' mumbled the twins with their mouths full of raspberries; 'no, we didn't come at all yesterday.'

'I believe I must have forgotten all about it!' exclaimed Great-Aunt Susan. 'How very thoughtless of me! I wonder how I ever came to do that!'

The twins knew, but they went on eating raspberries and did not enlighten her.

At about a quarter-past eleven the three walkers started off for Wizen Wood. Great-Aunt Susan went with them as far as the farm, and then she watched them on their way, with a little gentle amusement in her eyes. The twins looked so very small and Great-Uncle James so very large.

'I wonder if the dear children feel a little nervous, going all alone for a walk with their great-uncle,' she thought. 'But after all they went for a drive with him one day of their own accord, so I don't think they are really frightened by him. And it is all very well for him to pretend to be so gruff with them, but I really believe he is beginning to like their company. I wish I could listen to their conversation now! Dear James of course has no idea of how to talk to a child. We never had one of our own'—and here she sighed a little sigh—'and of course his own boyhood is so far behind him, I believe he hardly remembers it ever existed!'

By this time Great-Uncle James and his small companions had disappeared from view, so Great-Aunt Susan turned, and, after a few kindly words with the farmer's wife, went slowly back and into her beloved flower garden, where she rested quietly for a little, and then spent a peaceful, happy time going round her roses, snipping off the old heads, and cutting just a few beauties for the little round table in her sitting-room.

In the meantime Great-Aunt Susan was not missing anything in the way of conversation between Great-Uncle James and the twins, because Great-Uncle James was not in a conversational mood. The twins, perceiving this, soon hit on a splendid way of covering the ground.

'Do you mind if we stop sometimes to pick flowers, Great-Uncle James?' asked Celia demurely. 'We'll always catch you up again.'

'Please yourselves!' replied Great-Uncle James gruffly, and he continued to walk along, puffing at his pipe and turning over in his mind some knotty point that his agent had just been discussing with him.

So the twins cheerfully loitered behind, picking the honey-scented clover and purple scabious and the pink vetches which looked like little wild sweet peas; and then went skippiting forward till they were within a few yards of Great-Uncle James, when they would stop again and pick some more flowers; and then on they would go again. It was great fun; rather like the game of 'Grandmother's Steps', when you have to creep up and up towards the person playing 'Grandmother' without ever being seen to move when the 'Grandmother' suddenly turns her head. Because, although Great-Uncle James never *did* turn his head, he always might have done at any minute, and that was what made it so exciting.

By the time they reached the wood the twins' hands were filled with flowers, and Great-Uncle James had

finished his pipe. He took it out of his mouth, knocked the ashes out on a branch of the nearest tree, and then put it in his pocket.

'Now you two children had better go on ahead!' he told the twins. 'See what sort of Girl Guides you'd make, hey!'

The twins were pleased at the notion of being Girl Guides, so they started off at a brisk pace along the path through the wood, while Great-Uncle James came striding along behind.

The wood seemed to be particularly gay and green and pretty this morning, with little stars of sunshine coming dancing through the leaves, and a little rustling in the tree-tops when they were stirred by the small puffs of the summer breeze.

'No need to race along!' growled Great-Uncle James, who could not get over the ground with the same ease as the twins, as he had to stoop his tall frame under overhanging branches. 'The place'll wait for us all right!'

The twins obligingly went slower. They reflected that this time there was no reason to hurry to the secret dell because, of course, there was to be no wishing to-day.

'Oh, my lumbago!' groaned Great-Uncle James presently.

The twins turned to see him stooping painfully under a low branch.

'Oh, is your lumbago bad?' asked Celia sympathetically.

'No, but it soon will be if I go on like this,' replied Great-Uncle James. 'Ugh!' and he had to stoop again.

'It isn't *much* farther now,' said Delia encouragingly.

'All very well for you at your age to go scrambling through woods,' grumbled Great-Uncle James. 'I'm growing too old for this sort of thing! Ah—h! now I've got a crick in my neck!' He pulled up and rubbed the back of his neck gingerly. The twins stopped too.

'Would you rather go back?' asked Celia, who had an

idea at the back of her mind that this might really be the safest plan for all concerned.

'No, no, certainly not!' replied Great-Uncle James fiercely; for being a true Englishman he grumbled all the time, but he did not give in.

So the twins went on slowly, and Great-Uncle James followed, looking miserable but determined. At last they reached the squirrel tree.

'Now we go off this way, Great-Uncle James,' said Celia.

'What! off the path into all those bushes!' groaned Great-Uncle James. 'D'you expect me to crawl on my hands and knees! Can't be done! Impossible!'

'Oh no! you needn't crawl! It's quite easy!' said Celia.

'Great-Aunt Susan did it as easy as easy!' said Delia.

'Your great-aunt is only about half my size,' said Great-Uncle James gloomily; but with many complaints and a good deal of stooping he allowed himself to be led between the trees and bushes till he emerged, able to stretch himself to his full height, with a sigh of relief, on the edge of the secret dell.

The twins glanced up at his face to see what he thought of it.

'H'm, quite a nice little spot,' remarked Great-Uncle James, who was not given to going into raptures over the scenery. Then he gazed down consideringly on the soft grass and the short, cushiony pink thyme. 'Bless my soul! it looks quite snug!' he added. 'I think I'll just rest here a bit after all that exertion.' And, without more ado, Great-Uncle James stepped down into the middle of the secret dell and seated himself under the magic bush.

'Oh no, Great-Uncle James!' cried both twins together.

'Oh no! eh?' he inquired brusquely, 'and why not, I'd like to know?'

The twins hesitated, not knowing quite what to say.

'That—that isn't a very good place for you to rest,' stammered Celia.

'Quite good enough for me, thank ye,' replied Great-Uncle James dryly; and then he gave a large and loud yawn. 'You run away and play, and leave me in peace to take a little nap!' He leant back, folded his arms and closed his eyes. 'Ah, that's better! All very well for you at your age to go scrambling about woods!' he repeated grumblingly. 'Just wait till you're as old as I am, and have lumbago and a crick in your neck! Ha!' and he moved his head to a more comfortable position, and yawned again.

And the wood-pigeons in the tops of the trees called to one another: Croooo croooo croooo, croo croo: croooo croooo croooo, croo croo: croooo croooo croooo, croo croo.

'Oh yes, it's all very fine to be young!' growled Great-Uncle James. 'I only wish I felt as young as you!'

And then Great-Uncle James fell asleep.

CHAPTER XIII

A DREADFUL DEED

THE twins drew two breaths of relief. The obstinate Great-Uncle James had fallen asleep in the secret dell in spite of them, and he had actually wished a wish too. Still, it sounded such an innocent wish; surely no harm could come of it! Feeling no responsibility in the matter this time, they sat down side by side and waited patiently.

Great-Uncle James gave a loud snore—enough to keep any magic far away, the twins thought privately. But no —the magic was at work after all—for he slowly unfolded his arms and raised his right hand over his head. He tore off a tuft of green leaves from the magic bush. Then he woke up and struggled to a sitting position.

'Ugh, my neck!' he muttered, and with his right hand, still holding the leaves, he rubbed the back of his neck once more. 'Ah! that's better!' he said in an altered tone. 'All my stiffness quite gone!' And he sprang to his feet with such sudden alacrity that the twins quite jumped. 'Oh, there you are!' he said casually. 'What shall we do now? Shall we play a game? Or shall we climb trees?'

The twins' eyes grew larger and larger. What *had* happened to Great-Uncle James?

For it was difficult to realize just at once that though Great-Uncle James was still looking like a very big man with a fierce, bristly moustache and bushy eyebrows and white hair, and a rather red, wrinkly face, he was really only feeling like a boy of eight years old.

As the twins were so slow about replying, Great-Uncle James decided the question for himself.

'Well, I vote we climb trees!' He began exploring about

for a suitable tree to climb, and the twins picked themselves up and followed him, still dumb with surprise.

Presently Great-Uncle James discovered what he considered to be a climbable tree, and with a shout of triumph he mounted on to the first branch. But a branch that will support a boy of eight quite easily will not support a heavy, elderly man, and this branch broke, and Great-Uncle James, luckily with his arms still round the trunk, came slithering down to earth.

'What rotten trees!' he remarked peevishly, rubbing his shins rather ruefully. 'Let's get out of this stupid wood! I've had enough of it!'

They all made their way through to the path, and then they went back by the way they had come, but in a very different manner. For Great-Uncle James walked first with a jaunty step, whistling and slashing at the branches with his walking-stick, and dodging easily and carelessly under the low boughs, while the twins pattered along behind him, wondering nervously what Great-Aunt Susan would say when this very different Great-Uncle James came home.

'Hurrah! there's a rabbit!' exclaimed Great-Uncle James, and he went careering after it between the tree trunks, brandishing his stick. But luckily the rabbit went the faster of the two and got safely away.

'What a pity!' remarked Great-Uncle James, returning to the path. 'I wanted to knock it on the head and have it for dinner.'

Celia found her voice at last.

'Then we're very glad you didn't!' she said severely. Because, although it is wrong as a rule to speak severely to one's great-uncle, when he behaves as if he were eight years old it is allowable.

'It would have been horrid to kill the poor little rabbit!' chimed in Delia indignantly.

'Spoil sports! Just like girls!' remarked Great-Uncle James, and he went on ahead, whistling as before.

'Oh, Celia!' whispered Delia in horror, 'this is the dreadfullest wish of all!'

'I know!' returned Celia tragically. 'But we didn't want him to!'

'No, but he's done it!' lamented Delia.

And Great-Uncle James really *had* done it, and no mistake!

When they emerged from the wood the twins had the utmost difficulty in getting their great-uncle to come along. He swung so vigorously backwards and forwards on the first gate that at last it gave way at its hinges, and they had to leave it leaning crookedly against the post, looking most disreputable. Every time he saw a butterfly he went chasing after it, with his hat held ready to knock it down, and his white hair shining in the sunlight; but he never managed to catch one. And when they reached the haystack he flung himself upon it and tore up great armfuls of hay, shouting to the twins to come and have a hay-fight. But the twins felt that they would as soon have a hay-fight with an elephant as with Great-Uncle James in his present mood, and they very prudently retreated to a safe distance.

'Do you think we could just go on and leave him?' whispered Delia rather nervously. 'When we get out of sight we could go skippiting and be back quite quick!'

But Celia felt a sense of duty towards her erratic great-uncle.

'No, we mustn't,' she said firmly. 'We don't know *what* he would do, or *when* he would come home.'

Then Delia had a good idea. She remembered that boys are usually hungry, and sometimes greedy.

'I think it is time for lunch, Great-Uncle James!' she called to him. 'And there's going to be treacle-tart for

COME AND HAVE A
HAY FIGHT !

pudding!' She knew that because Great-Aunt Susan had asked them if they would like it.

'Treacle-tart! Oh, jolly!' exclaimed Great-Uncle James, and he started off for home at a good fast pace.

This just suited the twins, who were now able to come skippiting along behind him once more, to their great joy and relief, and they did not change from skippiting to running until they had to pass the farm.

Great-Aunt Susan was standing at the front door to welcome them back.

'No hurry! no hurry!' she called out smilingly when she saw Great-Uncle James come striding along, with the twins running behind him. But when she had a nearer view of Great-Uncle James she stared at him in surprise. 'James, dear!' she exclaimed. 'What *have* you been doing? You are all over hay!'

'Been rolling in a haystack,' replied Great-Uncle James cheerfully. 'Isn't it time for lunch? I'm awfully hungry!'

'Rolling in a haystack!' repeated Great-Aunt Susan in astonishment.

The twins had come up by now and were gazing at their great-aunt with anxious faces. They felt somehow as if they were to blame for bringing back Great-Uncle James in this strange condition.

'Ah!' continued Great-Aunt Susan with a little gasp, 'you have been playing games with the children. How nice!'

'No, I haven't!' returned this amazing Great-Uncle James. 'They wouldn't play at anything. I never saw such muffs!'

Great-Aunt Susan stared at Great-Uncle James. Then she looked anxiously towards the twins.

'Your great-uncle didn't go without his hat at all, did he, in this hot sun?' she asked anxiously.

'Yes, he did, a little time,' replied Celia, remembering Great-Uncle James chasing butterflies.

'Oh dear! oh dear! how very bad for him!' murmured Great-Aunt Susan, who instantly concluded that her poor husband had a touch of sunstroke. 'James dear,' she said in soothing tones, 'don't you think you had better lie down for a little in a darkened room, and I will put some eau de Cologne on your poor head?' She took his arm and tried to lead him indoors.

'I don't want to lie down; and I haven't got a poor head!' exclaimed Great-Uncle James indignantly, breaking away from Great-Aunt Susan's gentle hold. 'I want my lunch! I want that treacle-tart!'

'Yes, dear, yes!' said Great-Aunt Susan, still speaking soothingly. 'The gong will go in a moment now. Run upstairs, dear children, and get ready for luncheon,' she added, turning to the twins, not wishing them to see their poor great-uncle in this sad state.

When the twins came down again they found Great-Aunt Susan in the drawing-roon, picking hay off the impatient Great-Uncle James, and still vainly trying to induce him to lie down and go without his luncheon. As the gong sounded he shot away from her and hurried first into the dining-room. Great-Aunt Susan and the twins followed, taking their places in a startled silence, and luncheon began.

'Cold mutton! pooh! How dull!' exclaimed Great-Uncle James.

Great-Aunt Susan looked distressed, for Great-Uncle James usually liked cold meat.

'There is some of your favourite chutney, dear,' she said.

'I hate chutney; it burns so!' was Great-Uncle James's surprising reply.

'Would you like a cup of Benger's?' asked Great-Aunt Susan solicitously. 'It would be better for you than meat.'

But Great-Uncle James seemed to think even less of Benger's.

'Will you take beer, sir?' said Parker; for that was Great-Uncle James's usual drink at luncheon.

'Ugh! no, *thank* you!' said Great-Uncle James very emphatically. 'Haven't you got any lemonade?'

'Lemonade, sir?' said Parker faintly; for his master had never asked for such a thing before.

'Yes, lemonade!' shouted Great-Uncle James.

Parker pulled himself together and filled Great-Uncle James's tumbler with the lemonade provided for the twins.

'Quite right, dear!' said Great-Aunt Susan rather timidly; 'lemonade will be much better for you to-day, and it will help to cool your poor head.'

'I tell you I haven't got a poor head!' exclaimed Great-Uncle James with much annoyance. However, he drank the lemonade thirstily and then went on with the despised cold mutton with a healthy appetite.

Great-Aunt Susan tried to talk to the twins, but her attention was wandering all the time. She was evidently terribly worried by the unusual behaviour of her husband, though she endeavoured to hide her anxiety. Only when Great-Uncle James demanded a second helping of treacle-tart did she make a little protest.

'James, dear, do you think it is *quite* wise?'

'Yes, I do,' replied Great-Uncle James, as he helped himself to an enormous piece.

At last luncheon came to an end.

'And *now*, dear,' said Great-Aunt Susan very firmly to Great-Uncle James, 'I really must insist that you lie down for a little. The walk in that hot sun has upset you more than you realize, and you simply must keep a little quiet now!' And she was so determined about it that she actually managed to make the unwilling Great-Uncle James lie down on the sofa in the library while she covered

his feet with a rug. 'Now just keep quite quiet there for a little, and you will have a nice little sleep,' she added, patting his shoulder gently.

'I'm sure I shan't!' declared Great-Uncle James, edging away impatiently as if he hated to be patted. 'And anyway, I want something to look at. I won't stay here doing nothing!'

Great-Aunt Susan felt she must humour him. She glanced towards the table.

'Will you have the *Spectator*?' she asked kindly.

'Pooh no! That's so dull!' said Great-Uncle James impatiently. 'I'll have that!' and he pointed to the copy of *Little Folks* that the twins had brought with them.

Great-Aunt Susan's heart sank still lower at this fresh evidence of an affected brain, but she hastily handed over the magazine to Great-Uncle James, who turned the pages with interest.

'There's one quite decent story,' he announced. 'I'll read that, and then I'm going out.'

'Very well, dear,' agreed Great-Aunt Susan, feeling comfortably certain that he would soon fall asleep when left to himself.

'Poor Great-Uncle James!' she said to the children, as she went out to join them on the lawn, where they had been hovering about uneasily; 'the sun has been too much for him, though he doesn't realize it at present. You mustn't be surprised at his being a little unlike himself. I fear he may have a horrid headache presently, but I hope by to-morrow he will be *quite* well again.'

The twins said earnestly that they were certain Great-Uncle James would be quite well again to-morrow; and Great-Aunt Susan patted their shoulders and told them they were good, kind little girls, which made them feel a little uncomfortable, as they were not quite sure they deserved such a description.

Then Great-Aunt Susan returned indoors to have a little rest. She tip-toed up to the library door and listened intently. 'Not a sound! I expect he is just dropping off,' she said to herself hopefully, and tip-toed into the drawing-room, where she lay down on the sofa.

The twins, feeling rather solemn, went along to the tennis court and sat in the little summer-house while they talked things over.

'It 's a dreadful muddle!' said Celia sadly.

'It's a much dreadfuller muddle than we were in yesterday,' said Delia solemnly. 'Because we only had to behave like another little girl, but Great-Uncle James is behaving like a little boy when he is really a great big, very old gentleman!'

'He isn't even behaving like a very good boy!' declared Celia.

'No, he isn't,' agreed Delia, shaking her head sadly.

They sat in silence for a few minutes, gazing at a little black-and-white wagtail which was running about on the lawn. Their mother had said one day that a wagtail always reminded her of a neat little gentleman in evening dress, and thinking of this reminded Delia of something else.

'Great-Uncle James always has a bath when he changes for dinner,' she said quickly; 'so that doesn't make it so *very* long to wait before the magic is washed away!'

Celia cheered up instantly.

'Of course!' she exclaimed; 'I'd forgotten about that! Oh, that makes it *much* better! And I was almost beginning to think we might have to tell Great-Aunt Susan all about everything!'

'So was I!' confessed Delia. 'It was so horrid seeing her look so mis'rable. But now we needn't, need we?'

And they felt so much relieved in their minds that they

left the summer-house and went skippiting about the grounds, enjoying themselves so thoroughly that they almost forgot about Great-Uncle James.

But when they went back to the house, just in good time for tea, Great-Aunt Susan came to meet them, asking, with an anxious face, if they had seen anything of their great-uncle.

The twins said no; they hadn't seen him at all.

'Dear! dear!' said Great-Aunt Susan in a worried manner. 'I wonder where he has got to! I thought he was asleep in the library, and unluckily I fell asleep myself in the drawing-room, and when I woke the library door was open and he was gone!'

The twins tried to reassure poor Great-Aunt Susan, and then they all started together in search of the missing Great-Uncle James. He had not gone very far, for they soon found him at the end of the flower garden, down on his hands and knees.

'James! James! You must come indoors at once!' cried Great-Aunt Susan in an agitated voice.

'Can't. I'm busy,' replied Great-Uncle James.

'What—*what* are you doing, James?' gasped Great-Aunt Susan, coming closer.

'Catching snails,' replied Great-Uncle James.

'*Catching snails!*' repeated Great-Aunt Susan in horror.

In all the years of their married life Great-Aunt Susan had never known her husband catch snails before.

'Just look!' said Great-Uncle James, holding out a cardboard box.

The twins looked, and saw that he had quite a fine collection of snails, and Great-Aunt Susan looked and gave a little scream.

'Oh, how *disgusting*!' she exclaimed. But then she remembered that her husband was not himself and must be humoured. 'Oh, very—very—er—*interesting*, dear,' she

said soothingly. 'But leave your box now and come and have some tea. It is just time.'

Great-Uncle James jumped up at that, and they all went back to the house, leaving the snails carefully covered by a well-ventilated lid.

There was a little argument in the hall, as Great-Uncle James did not see why he should wash his hands before tea; but Great-Aunt Susan stood firm about this. Sunstroke, or no sunstroke, she was not going to have anyone who had been spending the afternoon catching snails coming into tea with unwashed hands.

As they all sat down Great-Aunt Susan noticed Great-Uncle James's flushed face with renewed anxiety. What *was* she to do? Should she telephone for the doctor? But Great-Uncle James was always so furious if she asked the doctor to come. He was quite capable of refusing to see him. Poor Great-Aunt Susan hardly ate any tea, but Great-Uncle James ate more than enough for two; and the more he ate the more concerned Great-Aunt Susan grew.

'Now, dear, you will like to keep quiet with *The Times*, won't you?' she suggested tactfully when tea was over.

But not a bit of it! Great-Uncle James didn't want *The Times*, and he didn't want to keep quiet. He wanted to go back to the garden to catch more snails. And, regardless of his wife's protests, he marched off down the passage and hurried across the lawn towards the garden gate.

Great-Aunt Susan gazed after his retreating figure from the drawing-room window. She was quite pale with distress. The twins stood beside her, uncertain what to do or say. They looked at the clock. Half-past five. Only two hours more to wait before Great-Uncle James would have his bath; and then the magic would be washed away, Great-Aunt Susan's anxiety would be all forgotten, and everything would be well.

'Shall we go out to the garden too, my dears?' said Great-Aunt Susan in rather a trembling voice. 'Would you like to help me to cut the lavender?'

The twins said quickly that they would love to help to cut the lavender, so Great-Aunt Susan provided them each with a pair of scissors, and they all followed Great-Uncle James to the garden.

The twins cut steadily at the slender, sweet-scented lavender and laid it in bunches on the gravel path, while Great-Aunt Susan cut a little every now and then, but chiefly kept an anxious eye on Great-Uncle James, who continued to crawl about on his hands and knees catching snails.

Time passed by, and the lavender lay in great heaps on the path, and the box of snails was completely full.

'I think I've got enough now,' remarked Great-Uncle James, standing up and holding out his box for their admiration.

Great-Aunt Susan tried to suppress a shudder.

'Yes dear,' she said seriously, 'I think you have *quite* enough.'

'I'll just take 'em into the house now,' said Great-Uncle James cheerfully. 'And then I think I'll go to the kitchen garden and have some raspberries.'

Great-Aunt Susan tried feebly to protest against both these plans, but without success. So the whole party returned to the house, Great-Uncle James with the snails and Great-Aunt Susan and the twins with their arms full of lavender. The lavender was left in the little flower-room next the conservatory, and the snails were left in the library—but not for long!

'Dear children,' said Great-Aunt Susan hastily, as Great-Uncle James departed out of the front door, 'will you take that box and empty all those *disgusting* creatures out upon the rubbish heap *at once*?'

The twins did this willingly, for they knew that when Great-Uncle James was himself again he would not want to find a box full of snails in the library.

Great-Aunt Susan felt that she must keep an eye on her poor husband, even though she could do nothing to control him; so she soon followed him to the kitchen garden, and the twins went with her. The gardeners had finished their work for the day, and they found Great-Uncle James alone among the raspberries. The twins had no heart to eat any raspberries: they were feeling too sorry for Great-Aunt Susan.

When Great-Uncle James had had all the raspberries he wanted he went into one of the glass-houses to see what he could find there. He did not find any ripe fruit, but he found a garden syringe, which he brought out in triumph. Filling it from a tank near by, he proceeded to squirt it at the plum trees on the wall, to make them hurry up and get ripe, he explained.

Great-Aunt Susan watched him with sad astonishment. Presently she went back to the house to find out what the time was. In a few minutes she returned.

'It is quite time you came in now, James,' she said pleadingly. 'Your bath water is running, and you will be late for dinner if you don't come quickly.'

The twins heaved sighs of relief.

But Great-Uncle James was feeling eight years old, and unluckily boys of eight years old are not very fond of baths.

'I shan't have a bath this evening,' he said firmly. 'And I don't mean to change either,' and he shot off the syringe with a defiant bang.

Poor Great-Aunt Susan felt she could do no more. She went slowly back along the path and out of the garden door, and as she went the twins saw her handkerchief go up to her eyes. Great-Aunt Susan was crying. She was

crying because she was so unhappy about Great-Uncle James! They *must* do something to help her.

It was Delia who thought of what to do, but it was Celia who did the deed. Great-Uncle James had laid down the syringe for a moment, and Celia picked it up and filled it at the tank, holding it so that as little water as possible dripped out down the front of her frock.

'Look, Great-Uncle James! Look at that caterpillar!' exclaimed Delia, pointing to the ground.

'Oh, I say! how jolly!' exclaimed Great-Uncle James, and he went down on his hands and knees to look.

Celia took careful aim. Whish-sh-sh-sh! plop! went the syringe, as the contents went all over and down Great-Uncle James's neck!

* * * * * * * *

The real Great-Uncle James rose to his full height, his face suffused with purple at this monstrous outrage, while little trickles of cold water ran uncomfortably down his back. For the moment he completely lost control of his temper.

'How dare you? What d'you mean by it, hey?' he thundered in an awful voice.

For answer the terrified twins clung together and burst into tears.

With a smothered exclamation Great-Uncle James turned on his heel and left them.

'What shall we do? What shall we do?' sobbed the twins, suddenly overwhelmed by the enormity of their act.

For how could such a dreadful deed as deliberately shooting their great-uncle in the neck with the garden syringe ever be explained away?

CHAPTER XIV

AN ANXIOUS TIME

GREAT-AUNT SUSAN and Great-Uncle James had almost finished dinner when a whispered message was delivered to Parker at the door leading through to the pantry.

Parker approached Great-Aunt Susan's left elbow, as if he were about to hand the savoury, and murmured:

'If you please, m'm, Mary says, were you aware that the young ladies have not come upstairs yet?'

Now Great-Uncle James had only just had time to have his bath and scramble into his dress clothes before the gong went; he had had no time for private conversation with Great-Aunt Susan, and he had not considered Celia's attack with the garden syringe a suitable subject to broach before Parker. So Great-Aunt Susan still remained in happy ignorance of what had occurred.

'Not upstairs!' she exclaimed in astonishment. 'Why, how dreadful! Where can they be?'

'Hey! what's that?' asked Great-Uncle James, rather uncomfortably.

'The children!' said Great-Aunt Susan anxiously. 'They have not gone up to bed, and it is after half-past eight! Why, James, they were with you in the kitchen garden last! Surely you didn't leave them there?'

'H'm! ha! yes!' said Great-Uncle James, clearing his throat. 'Yes, yes, they were still there when I came in.'

'Oh dear! I suppose it is my fault forgetting to send them in myself!' said Great-Aunt Susan, very much vexed. 'Parker, tell Mary she must go to the kitchen garden and bring them in *at once*!'

Parker went to deliver the message.

'Really, James,' said his wife reproachfully, 'I should have thought you *could* have told the dear children it was their bedtime! I had to hurry indoors because I suddenly remembered I had not told Ellen to put a stitch in my lace collar. I do hope they haven't been eating raspberries all this time! What were they doing when you left them?'

'Er—ahem!—ha! They were crying,' blurted out Great-Uncle James.

'Crying!' exclaimed Great-Aunt Susan, staring at him in indignant amazement. 'James, what had you done to make the poor little things cry?'

'Humph!—ha!' snorted Great-Uncle James, who had really been rather taken aback by the twins' tears and wished that he had kept his wrath more within bounds. 'Well, if you want to know, one of them deliberately soaked me with the garden syringe!'

'What!' exclaimed Great-Aunt Susan. 'Nonsense, James!'

This really roused Great-Uncle James's indignation.

'Nonsense, indeed!' he said wrathfully. 'Upon my soul, I'll send Parker up for my collar if you don't believe me! Reduced to pulp it was! Reduced to pulp! The little demon got me in the back of the neck at close quarters!'

But Great-Aunt Susan was roused too.

'Well, if she did, *of course* it was a mistake!' she exclaimed. 'How *could* she have done it on purpose? Which of them was it?'

Great-Uncle James growled out that he didn't know which had done it and he didn't care. *One* of them did, anyway.

'One of them did!' repeated Great-Aunt Susan indignantly; 'and then, I suppose, you were so angry with the

poor darlings that you made them both cry! And it was all your fault, too, because you shouldn't have encouraged them to play with the syringe at all!'

Great-Uncle James was struck dumb by the injustice of this attack from his usually mild and sympathetic wife; and as Parker came in at one door Great-Aunt Susan swept, as majestically as her inches would allow, out of the other, to go to the garden door to meet Mary and the children.

But Mary was returning from the kitchen garden alone and shaking her head.

'They're not anywhere to be seen there, mum!' she said. 'I've looked and I've called, and there's not a sign of them!'

'Dear! dear! how tiresome! Perhaps they went across to the flower garden again!' suggested Great-Aunt Susan. She and Mary went together into the flower garden and walked all round. But no twins were to be seen there either.

'Celia! Delia!' called Great-Aunt Susan from time to time. 'Don't hide from us, dear children!'

But there was no answering sound.

Great-Uncle James had finished his solitary savoury, which he had been quite unable to enjoy, and was sitting alone sipping gloomily at a glass of port when Great-Aunt Susan came hurrying back to the dining-room with a grave face.

'The children are nowhere to be seen!' she exclaimed anxiously. 'We have searched the gardens and called. And the servants are quite certain they never came back into the house! Oh, James! do you think they can have *run away*?'

'Good gracious me!' spluttered Great-Uncle James, looking quite alarmed. 'Surely they'd never do that! No! no! no!'

'Were you *very* angry with them in the garden, James?' asked Great-Aunt Susan searchingly.

'Well—er—well I was—er—well perhaps I was angrier than I should have been,' confessed Great-Uncle James uneasily. 'I never meant to make 'em cry, you know!'

Great-Aunt Susan felt it was no time for reproaches now.

'And that was more than an hour ago! What are we to do?' she said, wringing her hands and looking almost ready to cry herself. 'My poor little girls!'

Great-Uncle James was now feeling thoroughly uncomfortable. He gulped down the remainder of his port and got up.

'Parker!' he roared.

Parker promptly reappeared from the pantry.

'Send someone to the Home Farm to ask if the young ladies have been seen going that way. And tell Bolton to go down the drive and ask Saunders the same.'

'Very good, sir,' said Parker, and he almost hurried from the room.

'I'll just take a look round myself,' Great-Uncle James added gruffly; 'they're probably not far off. Hiding somewhere about, I shouldn't wonder.'

A few minutes later the whole of the household, including Mrs. Jackson the cook, were out searching for the missing twins, while Great-Aunt Susan hovered backwards and forwards between the front door and the door on to the terrace, not daring to go farther for fear she might miss the first sight of the truants returning.

Presently Great-Uncle James came back.

'Nobody seen 'em yet?' he asked gruffly.

Great-Aunt Susan shook her head unhappily.

Just at that moment the telephone bell rang. A moment later it rang again, more insistently.

'Where on earth is Parker?' exclaimed Great-Uncle James irritably.

'Oh! I expect he is outside looking for the children too,' said Great-Aunt Susan hastily. 'I'll go myself. Why, it might be some news about them!' she added excitedly, and she hurried to the telephone, which was just giving a third, still more clamorous ring.

In about a minute's time Great-Aunt Susan returned to Great-Uncle James, looking more agitated than ever.

'Oh James, this is dreadful!' she cried. 'That is Mrs. Meredith, speaking all the way from Whinbury!' (Mrs. Meredith was the twins' Aunt Laura.) 'And there has been some mistake about a letter which ought to have reached us days ago, and they are expecting the children to-morrow, and their nurse is coming for them, and what on earth am I to say?'

Great-Uncle James held his head in his hands and said a word he ought not to have said.

'You didn't tell her anything was wrong, did you?' he demanded.

'No! no! I couldn't!' said Great-Aunt Susan piteously. 'I don't know what I said; I was so taken aback. I said I must come and consult you.'

'Well, you can't keep her waiting,' said Great-Uncle James, thinking rapidly. 'Tell her it's all right and the children will be able to start!'

'But it's not all right; and how do you know they'll be able to start?' wailed Great-Aunt Susan. 'Perhaps we shall never find them!'

'Of course we'll find 'em!' roared Great-Uncle James. 'And if they can't go to-morrow we must wire in the morning. For goodness' sake go and tell the woman *something*!'

Great-Aunt Susan ran feverishly back to the telephone, and Great-Uncle James followed to hear what she said.

'Are you there, Mrs. Meredith? I'm so sorry to have kept you waiting so long,' she gasped, 'but—but it was

rather sprung upon us, you see. Yes, we think it will be all right for the children to start to-morrow . . . Yes, by the 3.15 train . . . Yes, if by any chance there should be a hitch we would telegraph . . . Yes,' with a frightened gasp, 'oh! —ah!—yes, indeed! *Good-bye!*' She hung up the receiver and turned to Great-Uncle James. 'Oh!' she exclaimed faintly, 'I nearly gave myself away when she said at the end she supposed we should be sorry to lose them! If she had only known that they were lost already! Oh dear! oh dear!'

'Come, come!' growled Great-Uncle James, 'it'll be all right. Why, bless my soul! even if they have run away children of that size couldn't go very far. We'll soon have 'em back again.' He stumped off to the front door to take another look round, and there he met Bolton.

'I've been down the drive, sir,' said Bolton, 'and Saunders and Mrs. Saunders haven't set eyes on the young ladies, and they say they couldn't possibly have got out on to the road, for the gates have been shut and locked since six o'clock sharp.'

'That's all right, then,' said Great-Uncle James gruffly. 'What about down the orchard way?'

'I came back by there, sir,' replied Bolton, shaking his head. 'But, if you please, sir, should I get out the car and go round by the wood and take a look there, for that's where the young ladies were always so fond of going? And if they're there, then I'll have the car handy to bring them home.'

Great-Uncle James gave an exclamation of approval.

'Now, why in the name of all that's wonderful did nobody have the sense to think of that before?' he growled. 'Bring the car round at once, Bolton! I'll come along with you!'

CHAPTER XV

WHAT REALLY HAPPENED

WHEN the twins were left crying together in the kitchen garden and asking each other what they should do, Celia had one of her sudden ideas. She promptly stopped crying, scrubbed her face with her handkerchief, and then offered the handkerchief to Delia, who had obviously lost hers.

'Delia!' she said breathlessly. 'Let's go to Wizen Wood *at once* and cut the string we tied the branches back with, and then nobody will find the way to the dell and wish wrong wishes again!'

This suggestion checked Delia's tears too.

'That's a very good idea!' she said solemnly. 'We *ought* to do that. It's too dangerous to leave them!'

'There's my scissors,' said Celia, picking them up from the ground, 'and you've got yours.'

They did not waste any time in further consideration. Armed with the scissors with which they had been cutting lavender they quickly and cautiously slipped out of the kitchen garden and crept behind the rhododendrons, which hid them from view of the house, till they reached the path to the farm, where they took to their heels and ran as fast as they could. As luck would have it, the farmer and his wife were both at supper, and so no one saw them pass. Once safely in the cows' meadow, they stopped for a few moments to regain their breath, and then off they set, skippiting hand-in-hand along the familiar way to Wizen Wood.

Of course they knew it was already past their bedtime. But then Great-Aunt Susan had never actually told them so; and everything had been so strange and upsetting this

evening that a little extra delay over going to bed seemed a very small matter.

'We won't be *very* long,' said Delia as they skimmed over the ground.

'No,' agreed Celia. 'We ought to get back just while Great-Aunt Susan and Great-Uncle James are having dinner. Then we'll go to bed *very* quick, and p'raps by to-morrow Great-Uncle James won't be quite so angry!' But she did not say this with much conviction, and Delia shook her head doubtfully.

They couldn't help feeling that if ever a grown-up person had just cause to be angry, that grown-up person was Great-Uncle James. And, of course, it was too late now to tell Great-Aunt Susan the true story, because she would have forgotten all about Great-Uncle James's strange behaviour and could not possibly be expected to believe them.

The sight of the gate that Great-Uncle James had swung upon and broken that very morning only strengthened their determination to prevent any further wishes. They looked at it sadly.

'P'raps they'll think *we* did it!' suggested Delia gloomily.

'Well, anyway, we can say truly we didn't do *that*,' declared Celia, who considered that they had quite enough on their shoulders already without taking any unnecessary blame.

They stopped skippiting and walked slowly into the wood. Somehow they did not feel very much like skippiting now. Skippiting was such a gay and happy way of going along, and people cannot feel very gay or happy when they are in disgrace, even if it is through no real fault of their own.

The wood was very, very quiet. The twins felt that all the rabbits and birds and other creatures must have gone to their beds, there was such a wonderful stillness over

THEY CUT THE STRING

everything. The breeze of the morning had died away completely, and now not even a leaf was stirring. They stole along the path as silently as they could, and when they spoke they spoke in whispers. Presently they came to the squirrel tree.

'We'll go to the dell first,' whispered Celia, and Delia nodded.

They slid quickly through between the trees and bushes and stood for a moment or two at the edge of the little dell, gazing in silence. The blue flowers of the magic bush were now tightly closed for the night. The wood-pigeons slept in the tops of the trees. Somehow it all seemed more mysterious than by day. Very quietly the children tip-toed away, and as they went they cut the string which had bound back the branches, and one by one with a gentle rustling sound the branches sprang back, once more barring the way to the secret dell.

And then——

* * * * * * * *

Quite lost count of by the careless children, the time of darkling moon had come! And Great-Uncle James's wish, and Great-Aunt Susan's wish, and Bolton's wish, and Muriel Mellon's wish, and even skippiting had vanished away from their memories as if they had never been.

The twins let the scissors fall to the ground and rubbed their eyes. They suddenly felt very, very sleepy.

'It's such a *long* way to walk back!' sighed Celia.

'Let's rest a little first!' sighed Delia.

They lay down side by side, with their yellow heads pillowed on the mossy roots of the squirrel tree. Tears and trouble had helped to tire them out, and in a moment they were sound asleep.

CHAPTER XVI

GOOD NIGHT

AND there, a couple of hours later, Great-Uncle James and Bolton found them.

The light was just beginning to grow dim in the shadowy wood, but the children's yellow frocks and yellow hair and pale faces showed up clearly against the dark ground. Great-Uncle James stood and stared down upon them for a moment with a queer expression on his face, as if he were trying to look fierce when he was really feeling just the opposite. Then, rather stiffly, he knelt down on one knee beside them.

'Hey, wake up, children!' he said. 'Can't spend the night here, y'know!'

The twins stirred, opened their eyes, blinked a little, and then sat up staring about them in great bewilderment at finding themselves out in the wood with Great-Uncle James and Bolton instead of in their beds. Then suddenly a memory of the garden syringe flashed upon them, and they both gazed up at Great-Uncle James with anxious faces.

'I—I don't know how the syringe went like that, Great-Uncle James!' stammered Celia with perfect truth. 'I—I didn't mean to be naughty!' Her voice broke a little, and Delia's lip quivered in sympathy.

'Now! now! none of that!' said Great-Uncle James gruffly. 'I'm not a bit angry now. All a mistake, I know! All a mistake! But if you cry again I shall be very angry indeed!'

The twins looked earnestly into his face to see if he was really serious, but finding something there that was almost

like a twinkle they changed their minds about crying and began to smile faintly instead.

'Come, that's better!' said Great-Uncle James in a tone of relief. He stood up and held out a helping hand to each child.

Bolton, after seeing that the children were safe and well, had discreetly slipped off, and was on his way back to the lane to turn the car.

'Must get along home now as quick as we can,' went on Great-Uncle James. 'Your great-aunt is wondering what has become of you.' This was a mild way of putting it, but Great-Uncle James did not want to hear any more explanations until he had brought the twins safely home.

The twins themselves were not yet sufficiently awake to think of explaining, or even to wonder how it was that Great-Uncle James, Bolton, and the car should all arrive so conveniently to fetch them. They stumbled sleepily along the path with Great-Uncle James till they reached the gate, and then Bolton helped them into their coats, which Great-Aunt Susan had thoughtfully sent, and half lifted them into the car.

'Put one in each corner,' directed Great-Uncle James. 'They'll be asleep again in another minute.'

Great-Uncle James seated himself between them, Bolton jumped on in front, and the car rolled off homewards.

The twins did not fall asleep again. Driving through the fresh air helped to keep them awake; but they were too drowsy to want to talk. Comfortably conscious that they were forgiven, and all was well, they leant one on each side against Great-Uncle James and wondered vaguely if they had ever been out of doors so late before.

'Found 'em all right, you see!' Great-Uncle James called out gruffly to Saunders, who stood waiting at the gates.

'That's a good job, sir!' called back Saunders, and he actually looked as if he was quite glad to see them.

The twins were a good deal astonished at the excitement caused by their return and the way Great-Aunt Susan hugged and kissed them again and again. They were quickly led into the lamp-lit library to have some supper, while Bolton was left to tell the news of how they had been found to the assembled household.

It was not until after they had had their supper that the twins really woke up properly and were able to explain just what had happened to them—or rather just what they thought had happened, which was not quite the same thing. But they declared earnestly and truthfully that they had never, never meant to run away.

'But why did you go all the way to the wood, dear children?' asked Great-Aunt Susan tenderly.

'Because—because we were frightened about the syringe squirting all over Great-Uncle James,' confessed Celia.

'We thought you would be very angry with us,' confessed Delia.

And they really believed that that was the true reason for their last visit to Wizen Wood.

'We meant to come back when you and Great-Uncle James would be having dinner,' explained Celia.

'Yes, we really did,' added Delia earnestly. 'It was *quite* a mistake going to sleep in the wood!'

And then Great-Aunt Susan had to hug them all over again and say of course she wasn't angry. It had all been a mistake, hadn't it?—and she was so very glad to see her little girls safe back again. And the twins said they were very, very sorry they had made her anxious. And Great-Uncle James chimed in gruffly and said it was a terrible thing to have such troublesome great-nieces; but everybody knew he didn't really mean it.

And then the twins had to be told the surprising news

that the very next day Nurse was going to arrive and take them off to the seaside to stay with Uncle Jack and Aunt Laura.

They opened their eyes very wide.

'But have we stayed here for a fortnight?' they asked.

And Great-Aunt Susan told them yes, just over a fortnight; but as she had received no letter she had been hoping that they were going to be left with her a little longer.

'I am very sorry to have to let you go, my dears,' said Great-Aunt Susan fondly. 'But it has been a great joy to have you here, and I hope you have had a happy time.'

And the twins flung their arms round Great-Aunt Susan and said they had had a *lovely* time.

'Come to stay with us another time, hey?' inquired Great-Uncle James.

'Oh yes, we *will*!' replied the twins firmly.

And now it was so very late that they must be bundled off to bed before another minute. Parker came in to carry off the tray, and Mary stood waiting for them at the door.

'Say good-night to your great-uncle, my dears,' said Great-Aunt Susan. 'I shall be coming up presently to tuck you safely into your little beds.'

The twins advanced to Great-Uncle James's arm-chair.

'Good night, Great-Uncle James,' they said affectionately; and no longer daunted by his moustache or his air of fierceness first Celia and then Delia put her arms round his neck and gave him a kiss.

'And as pleased as Punch he looked about it too!' Parker told an interested audience in the kitchen afterwards.

'James!' said Great-Aunt Susan delightedly, as the door closed behind the twins, 'I believe you are really

every bit as devoted to the dear children as I am myself! Now, can you deny it?'

But Great-Uncle James merely grunted and buried himself behind *The Times*. Somehow he had neglected to read it earlier in the day.

THE END

TO
WIZEN WOOD
Colt Watson

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